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THE WAGNERIAN SUBLIME

Four Lacanian Readings of Classic Operas

August

Lacanian Explorations II

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Lacanian Explorations

edited by Dominik Finkelde and Slavoj Žižek

The impact of Lacanian psychoanalysis on contemporary theory generated a series of questions that challenge the traditional categorial framework of practical and political philosophy. The series *Lacanian Explorations* continues this quest to rethink basic philosophical concepts through Lacan.

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I. THE 'LEHRSTÜCK' *PARSIFAL*

The Wagnerian Sublime

Jacques Rancière elaborated the opposition between the Freudian unconscious (which is thoroughly 'rational,' the articulation of a strategy to deal with specific traumatic experiences: the Freudian formations of the unconscious are encoded messages to be deciphered) and the aesthetic unconscious prevalent in the great tradition of the 19th century which begins with Schopenhauer, whose peak is Wagner's *Tristan* and whose last great expression is Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, the unconscious of the oceanic feeling, of self-obliteration of subjectivity in the immense sea of the primordial formless abyss. As Rancière perspicuously noted, Freud's rejection of this aesthetic unconscious also accounts for the (sometimes embarrassingly naive) psychologically realistic character of his interpretations of works of art: he is not interested in textual details which subvert the narrative or the topic (content) of a work; what he does is either treat a person from literary fiction as a real clinical case, or interpret the work of art as a symptom of the artist's pathology.

Rancière's thesis has to be supplemented on three counts. He writes that the discovery of the death drive is "an episode in Freud's long and often disguised confrontation with the great obsessive theme of the epoch in which psychoanalysis was formed, the unconscious of the Schopenhauerian thing-in-itself and the great

literary fictions of return to this unconscious.”¹ Freud’s numerous literary and art analyses were thus “so many ways of resisting the nihilist entropy that Freud detects and rejects in the works of the aesthetic regime of art, but that he will also legitimize in his theorization of the death drive.”² But one can easily show (as Lacan did in a very convincing way) that the Freudian death drive is not his term for the Schopenhauerian striving for self-annihilation, for joining the primordial abyss, etc., but, quite to the contrary, a radical compulsion-to-repeat which persists ‘beyond life and death.’ Freud invented the ‘death drive’ in order to posit a libidinal force which precisely runs against the “nihilist entropy.”

This point is linked to the second correction: Rancière is too quick to identify today’s predominant ‘textual’ psychoanalytic approach to art and literature as a continuation of the Schopenhauerian self-dissolution in the primordial abyss. One can demonstrate how modernism proper enacts precisely a break with this late-Romantic topic. Although both the Romantic poetry of the ‘eternal Night’ and the modernist formalism oppose the traditional representative narrative logic, they undermine it from opposite directions: Romanticism asserts the force of the “nihilist entropy” which dissolves the structures of narrative representation, while modernism insists on formal details which display a structure of their own, at a distance from narrative representation, yet also opposed to self-annihila-

¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2009, p. 82.

² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

tion in the 'eternal sea.' These formal details which insist independently of the narrative representation are more like the Freudian death drive, an insistence beyond the cycle of 'life and death' rendered by the narrative—only in this way can Freudian theory be linked to modern art.

Third and last point: can Wagner's Romanticism really be reduced to the nihilist entropy? With Romanticism, music changes its role: it is no longer a mere accompaniment of the message delivered in speech, it contains a message of its own, "deeper" than the one delivered in words. It was Rousseau who first clearly articulated this expressive potential of music as such, when he claimed that, instead of merely imitating the affective features of verbal speech, music should be given the right to "speak for itself"—in contrast to the deceiving verbal speech, in music, it is, to paraphrase Lacan, the truth itself which speaks. As Schopenhauer put it, music directly enacts the noumenal *Will*, while speech remains limited to the level of phenomenal representation. Music is the substance which renders the true heart of the subject, what Hegel called the "Night of the World," the abyss of radical negativity: with the shift from the Enlightenment subject of rational *logos* to the Romantic subject of the "Night of the World," that is, with the shift of the metaphor for the kernel of the subject from Day to Night, music becomes the bearer of the true message beyond words. Here we encounter the Uncanny: no longer the external transcendence, but, following Kant's transcendental turn, the excess of the Night in the very heart of the

subject (the dimension of the Undead), what Tomlinson called the “internal otherworldliness that marks the Kantian subject.”³ What music renders is no longer the “semantics of the soul,” but the underlying “noumenal” flux of *jouissance* beyond linguistic meaning. This noumenal flux is radically different from the pre-Kantian transcendent divine Truth: it is the inaccessible excess which forms the very core of the subject.

After such a celebration of musicality, one cannot but agree with Vladimir Nabokov when he characterized the ideal state as the one in which there is “no torture, no executions, and no music.”⁴ Effectively, the line of separation between the sublime and the ridiculous, between a noble act and a pathetic empty gesture, is ultimately untraceable. Recall the beginning of the first movement of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*: was there ever a more succinct declaration of the resolute stance, the stubborn stance of the uncompromising will to enact one’s decision?⁵ However, is it not that, if

³ Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999, p. 94.

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, New York: McGraw-Hill 1973, p. 35.

⁵ Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the infamous fourth movement. In one of his essays, Adorno mentions a wonderful example of the vulgarity of *Halbbildung*: an American manual that should help people to recognize the best-known classical music pieces and thus avoid embarrassment in intellectual society—how? The author proposes for each best-known classical melody words (allegedly illustrating its “content”) which should help us remember it—the four-note motif at the beginning of Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* is thus translated as “Hear how fate knocks! Hear how fate knocks!” the main melodic line of the first movement of Tchaikovsky’s *Sixth Symphony* as “the storm is over, Tchaikovsky’s calm but sad again...” Adorno, of course, explodes with rage (obviously mixed with extreme obscene enjoyment) at this barbarism. The problem with the fourth movement of Beethoven *Ninth* which sets to music Schiller’s ode about the brotherhood of all men, etc., is that, in it,

one just barely shifts the perspective, the same gesture cannot but appear as a ridiculous gesturing, a hysterical waving with hands which betrays the fact that we are effectively dealing with an imposture?—However, what if we read the stance of the first movement not as dignity, but as the *obstinacy* of the “undead” drive? What this oscillation of ours means is that there is no kitsch in itself: what Bartok achieves in his *Concerto for Orchestra* is to *redeem* the ultimate kitsch melody from Lehar’s *The Merry Widow*—the quoting of Lehar is in no way meant ironically, since, by quoting it in a different context, it de-fetishizes it, providing it with a proper musical environs out of which this beautiful melody emerges “organically.” Luckily, however, the problem with this expressive potential of music is that, brought to its conclusion, to the end, it cancels itself: when we progress to the very core of the subject, we encounter the fantasmatic kernel of enjoyment which can no longer be subjectivized or affectively assumed by the subject—the subject can only stare, with a cold transfixed gaze, at this kernel, unable to fully recognize himself in it. Recall “Der Laienmann,” the last song of Schubert’s *Winterreise*: at the very highpoint of despair, emotions are frozen, we are back at the non-expressive mechanism, the subject is reduced to the utter despair of mimicking the automatism of mechanical music.

In the history of opera, this sublime excess of life is discernible in two main versions, Italian and German,

he *does* this to himself: Schiller’s words effectively function as precisely such a vulgar reminder of the “deep” content.

Rossini and Wagner—so, maybe, although they are the great opposites, Wagner’s surprising private sympathy for Rossini, as well as their friendly meeting in Paris, bears witness to a deeper affinity. Rossini’s great male portraits, the three from *Barbiere* (Figaro’s “Largo al factotum,” Basilio’s “Calunnia,” and Bartolo’s “A un dottor della mia sorte”), plus the father’s wishful self-portrait of corruption in *Cenerentola*, enact a mocked self-complaint, where one imagines oneself in a desired position, being bombarded by demands for a favor or service. The subject shifts his position twice: first, he assumes the roles of those who address him, enacting the overwhelming multitude of demands which bombard him; then, he feigns a reaction to it, the state of deep satisfaction in being overwhelmed by demands one cannot fulfill. Let us take the father in *Cenerentola*: he imagines how, when one of his daughters will be married to the Prince, people will turn to him, offering him bribes for a service at the court, and he will react to it first with cunning deliberation, then with fake despair at being bombarded with too many requests. The culminating moment of the archetypal Rossini aria is this unique moment of happiness, of the full assertion of the excess of Life that occurs when the subject is overwhelmed by demands, no longer being able to deal with them. At the highpoint of his “factotum” aria, Figaro exclaims: “What a crowd / of people bombarding me with their demands / – have mercy, one at a time / uno alla volta, per carità!” referring therewith to the Kantian experience of the Sublime, in which the subject is bombarded with an excess of data

that he is unable to comprehend. The basic economy is here obsessional: the object of the hero's desire is the other's demand.

This excess is the proper counterpoint to the Wagnerian Sublime, to the "höchste Lust" of the immersion into the Void that concludes *Tristan*. This opposition of the Rossinian and of the Wagnerian Sublime perfectly fits the Kantian opposition between the mathematical and the dynamic Sublime: as we have just seen, the Rossinian Sublime is mathematical, it enacts the inability of the subject to comprehend the pure quantity of the demands that overflow him, while the Wagnerian Sublime is dynamic, it enacts the concentrated overpowering force of the *one* demand, the unconditional demand of love. One can also say that the Wagnerian Sublime is the absolute Emotion—this is how one should read the famous first sentence of Wagner's *Religion and Art*,⁶ where he claims that, when religion becomes artificial, art can save the true spirit of religion, its hidden truth—how? Precisely by abandoning the dogma and rendering only the authentic religious emotion, that is, by transforming religion into the ultimate aesthetic experience. (And the paradox of *Parsifal* is that it turns *Tristan* around: the intimate metaphysical experience is again forcefully externalized, turned into, precisely, *ritual*—the climaxes of *Parsifal* are undoubtedly the two Grail rituals.)

⁶ See Richard Wagner, *Religion and Art*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1994.

Tristan should thus be read as the resolution of the tension between sublime passion and religion still operative in *Tannhäuser*. The entreaty at the beginning of *Tannhäuser* enacts a strange reversal of the standard entreaty: not to escape the constraints of mortality and rejoin the beloved, but the entreaty addressed at the beloved to let the hero go and return to the mortal life of pain, struggle, and freedom. Tannhäuser complains that, as a mortal, he cannot sustain continuous enjoyment. ("Wenn stets ein Gott genießen kann, bin ich dem Wechsel untertan; nicht Lust allein liegt mir am Herzen, aus Freuden sehn ich mich nach Schmerzen."⁷ / "Though a god may incessantly savor enjoyment, I am subject to change; pleasure alone does not lie close to my heart—in the midst of joy I crave after pain.") A little bit later, Tannhäuser makes it clear that what he longs for is the peace of death itself: "Mein Sehnen drängt zum Kampfe, nicht such ich Wonn und Lust! Ach mögest du es fassen, Göttin! (*wild*) Hin zum Tod, den ich suche, zum Tode drängt es mich!"⁸ / "My longing drives me into the fight, not looking out for delight and lust! Oh, may you understand that, Goddess. (*wild*) It drives me towards death, as I look out for him!" If there is a conflict between eternity and temporal existence, between transcendence and terrestrial reality here, then Venus is on the side of a terrifying eternity of unbearable excessive *Genießen*.

⁷ Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1963, p. 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

This provides the key to the opera's central conflict: it is *not*, as it is usually claimed, the conflict between the spiritual and the bodily, the Sublime and the ordinary pleasures of flesh, but a conflict internal to the Sublime itself, splitting it up. Venus and Elisabeth are *both* metaphysical figures of the Sublime: none of the two is a woman destined to become a common wife. While Elisabeth is, obviously, the sacred virgin, the purely spiritual entity, the *untouchable* idealized Lady of the courtly love, Venus also stands for a metaphysical excess, that of the excessively intensified sexual enjoyment; if anything, it is Elisabeth who is closer to the ordinary terrestrial life. In Kierkegaard's terms, one can say that Venus stands for the Aesthetic and Elisabeth for the Religious—on the condition that one conceives here of the Aesthetic as included in the Religious, elevated to the level of the unconditional Absolute. And therein resides the unpardonable sin of Tannhäuser: not in the fact that he engaged in a little bit of free sexuality (in this case, the severe punishment would have been ridiculously exaggerated), but that he elevated sexuality, sexual lust, to the level of the Absolute, asserting it as the inherent obverse of the Sacred. This is the reason why the roles of Venus and Elisabeth definitely should be played by the same singer: the two *are* one and the same person, the only difference resides in the male hero's attitude towards her. Is this not clear from the final choice Tannhäuser has to make between the two? When he is in his mortal agony, Venus is calling him to join her again ("Komm,

o komm! Zu mir! Zu mir!"⁹ / "Come, oh come! To me, to me!"); when he gets close to her, Wolfram cries from the background "Elisabeth!" to which Tannhäuser replies: "Elisabeth!" In the standard staging, the mention of the dead sacred Elisabeth gives Tannhäuser the strength to avoid Venus' embrace, and Venus then leaves in fury; however, would it not be much more logical to stage it so that Tannhäuser continues to approach *the same* woman, discovering, when he is close to her, that Venus really is Elisabeth? The subversive power of this shift is that it turns around the old courtly love poetry motif of the dazzlingly beautiful lady who, when one approaches her too much, is revealed as a disgusting entity of rotten flesh full of crawling worms—here, the sacred virgin is discovered in the very heart of the dissolute seductress. So the message is not the usual desublimation ("Beware of the beautiful woman! It is a deceptive lure which hides the disgusting rotten flesh!"), but an unexpected sublimation, the elevation of the erotic woman to the status of the appearance of the sacred Thing. The tension of *Tannhäuser* is thus the one between the two aspects of the Absolute, Ideal-Symbolic and Real, Law and Super-ego. The true topic of *Tannhäuser* is that of a *disturbance in the order of sublimation*: sublimation starts to oscillate between these two poles.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁰ In the 2002 Bayreuth staging of *Tannhäuser*, Wolfram is at the end excluded from the crowd, a mere profile in darkness, an embittered loser. This detail rests on an ingenious insight: that Wolfram, this proverbial "best friend" trying to help Tannhäuser and enable him to redeem himself, is effectively an utterly *bad* character: the—no less proverbial—man in love with his best friend's girl

Wagner with Kierkegaard

We can see, now, in what precise sense *Tristan* embodies the 'aesthetic' attitude (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term): refusing to compromise one's desire, one goes to the end and willingly embraces death. *Meistersinger* counters it with the ethical solution: the true redemption resides not in following the immortal passion to its self-destructive conclusion; one should rather learn to overcome it via creative sublimation and to return, in a mood of wise resignation, to the 'daily' life of symbolic obligations. In *Parsifal*, finally, the passion can no longer be overcome via its reintegration to society in which it survives in a gentrified form: one has to deny it thoroughly in the ecstatic assertion of the religious *jouissance*. The triad *Tristan-Meistersinger-Parsifal* thus follows a precise logic: *Meistersinger* and *Tristan* display the two opposite versions of the Oedipal matrix, within which *Meistersinger* inverts *Tristan* (the son steals the woman from the paternal figure; the passion breaks out between the paternal figure and the young woman destined to become the partner of the young man), while *Parsifal* gives these coordinates an anti-Oedipal twist—the lamenting wounded subject is here the paternal figure (Amfortas), not the young transgressor (Tristan). (The closest one comes to lament in *Meistersinger* is Sachs'

who tries to win the girl by working for the destruction of the friend while feigning sympathy and help. Wolfram is a thorough hypocrite secretly pushing his best friend towards misfortune, so that he can then publicly present himself as a devastated mourner and supporter of the unfortunate girl.

“Wahn, Wahn!” song from Act III.)¹¹ Wagner planned to have in the first half of Act III of *Tristan Parsifal* to visit the wounded Tristan, but he wisely renounced it: not only would the scene ruin the perfect overall structure of Act III, it would also stage the *impossible* encounter of a character with (the different, alternate reality, version of) *itself*, as in the time travel science fiction narratives where I encounter *myself*. One can even turn things here into a laughing matter by imagining the *third* hero joining the two—Hans Sachs (in his earlier embodiment, as King Marke who arrives with a ship prior to Isolde), so that the three of them (Tristan, Marke, Parsifal), standing for the three attitudes, debate their differences in a Habermasian undistorted communicational exchange.

The way to read Wagner is thus through a ‘horizontal’ rather than a ‘vertical’ interpretation: one should look for structural variations of a gesture or object, and not directly for its meaning. Kundry’s kiss to Parsifal is to be compared to Siegfried’s kiss to Brünnhilde; the Grail to the Ring; etc. The first step in a proper understanding of Wagner’s work is to establish the multiple series of features which serve as lateral links between different operas of Wagner himself as well as between Wagner’s operas and other composer’s operas. Say, the feature that links *Meistersinger* and *Tannhäuser* is the central place of a singing competition: Wagner came to the idea to do *Meistersinger* in 1845, immediately after he finished *Tannhäuser*—what about a comic counter-

¹¹ Richard Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1965, p. 76.

part to the tragic singing competition in the center of *Tannhäuser*? Another passage to *Meistersinger* starts from *Tristan*: in contrast to the latter, in *Meistersinger*, the explosion of excessive desire is tamed, contained. Crucial here is the parallel between King Marke and Hans Sachs: they both offer the beloved woman to the younger man; however, in *Tristan*, the offer arrives *too late* (Marke makes it to dead Tristan), while in *Meistersinger*, the offer is accepted, ensuring the happy outcome. No wonder, then, that, in the Act III, Scene 4, of *Meistersinger*, just before the sublime quintet, there is an outburst of a quasi-incestuous erotic tension between the young Eva and the fatherly figure of Hans Sachs, in which King Marke is directly mentioned:

Eva: "If I had the choice, I would choose none but you; you were my husband, I would give the prize to none but you.—But now I am chosen [...] if I am married today, then I had no choice: that was obligation, compulsion!"

Hans Sachs: "My child, of Tristan and Isolde, I know a sad fate. Hans Sachs was clever and did not want anything of Herr Marke's lot. It was high time that I found the right man for you."¹²

The quintet which follows thus not only stands for the moment of inner peace and reconciliation that precedes the crucial struggle; it also marks the resolved incestuous tension.—And, along these lines, one is

¹² Ibid., p. 93.

tempted to claim that the triad of *Tristan-Meistersinger-Parsifal* is reproduced in three exemplary post-Wagnerian operas: Richard Strauss' *Salome*, Puccini's *Turandot*, and Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. Is not *Salome* yet another version of the possible outcome of *Tristan*? What if, at the end of Act II, when King Marke surprises the lovers, he were to explode in fury and order Tristan's head to be cut off; the desperate Isolde would then take her lover's head in her hands and start to kiss his lips in a Salomean *Liebestod*... (And, to add yet another variation of the virtual link between *Salome* and *Tristan*: what if, at the end of *Tristan*, Isolde would not simply die after finishing her "Mild und leise"¹³—what if she were to remain entranced by her immersion in the ecstatic *jouissance*, and, disgusted by it, King Marke would give the order: "This woman is to be killed"?) It was often noted that the closing scene of *Salome* is modelled on Isolde's *Liebestod*; however, what makes it a perverted version of the Wagnerian *Liebestod* is that what Salome demands, in an unconditional act of *caprice*, is to kiss the lips of John the Baptist ("I want to kiss your lips!")—what is wanted is not contact with a person, but with the partial object. If *Salome* is a counterpart to *Tristan*, then *Turandot* is the counterpart to *Meistersinger*—let us not forget that they are both operas about the public contest with the woman as the prize won by the hero.

Salome twice insists until the end in her demand: first, she insists that the soldiers bring her Jochanaan; then, after the dance of seven veils, she insists that the

¹³ Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1966, p. 79.

king Herod bring her the head of Jochanaan on a silver platter. But when the king, believing that Jochanaan is a sacred man and that it is therefore better not to touch him, offers Salome in exchange for her dance anything she wants—up to half of his kingdom and the most sacred objects in his custody—but not the head (and thus the death) of Jochanaan, she ignores this outburst of higher and higher bidding and simply repeats her inexorable demand “Bring me the head of Jochanaan.” Is there not something properly Antigonean in this request of hers? Like Antigone, she insists without regard to consequences. Is therefore Salome not in a way, no less than Antigone, the embodiment of a certain ethical stance? No wonder she is so attracted to Jochanaan—it is one saint recognizing another. And how can one overlook that, at the end of Oscar Wilde’s play on which Strauss’ opera is based, after kissing his head, she utters a properly Christian comment on how this proves that love is stronger than death, that love can overcome death?

Which, then, would be the counterpart to *Parsifal*? *Parsifal* was from the very beginning perceived as a thoroughly ambiguous work: at once an attempt to reassert art at its highest, a proto-religious spectacle bringing together Community (art as the mediator between religion and politics) against the utilitarian corruption of modern life with its commercialized kitsch culture—yet at the same time an almost commercialized aesthetic kitsch of an ersatz religion, a fake if there ever was one. In other words, the problem of *Parsifal* is not the unmediated dualism of its universe (Klingsor’s

kingdom of fake pleasures versus the sacred domain of the Grail), but, rather, the lack of distance, the ultimate identity, of its opposites: is not the Grail ritual (which provides the most satisfying aesthetic spectacle of the work, its two 'biggest hits') the ultimate 'Klingsorian' fake? (The taint of bad faith in our enjoyment of *Parsifal* is similar to the bad faith in our enjoyment of Puccini.)

The central problem of *Parsifal* is that of a ceremony (ritual): how is it possible to perform a ritual in the conditions where there is no transcendence to guarantee it? As an aesthetic spectacle? The enigma is here: what are the limits and contours of a ceremony? Is the ceremony only that which Amfortas is unable to perform, or is part of the ceremony also the spectacle of his complaint, resistance, and final acquiescence to perform the ceremony? In other words, are Amfortas' two great complaints not highly ceremonial, ritualized? Is not even the 'unexpected' arrival of Parsifal to replace him (who, nonetheless, arrives just in time, i.e., in the just moment, when the tension is at its highest) part of a ritual?

Do we not find a ritual also in *Tristan*, in the great duet that takes most of the Act II? The long introductory part consists of the emotional rambling of the couple, and the ritual proper begins with "*So stürben wir, um ungetrennt...*"¹⁴ with its sudden shift to a declamatory mode—from this point on, it is no longer the two individuals who sing, it is a ceremonial Other which takes over. One should always bear in mind this feature which troubles the strict opposition between the

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

domains of Day (symbolic obligations) and Night (endless passion): the highest point of *Lust*, the immersion into the Night, is itself highly ritualized, it takes the form of its opposite, of a stylized ritual.

And is this problem of a ceremony (liturgy) not also the problem of all revolutionary processes, from the French Revolution with its spectacles of the people, to the October Revolution? Let us recall the staged performance of "Storming the Winter Palace" in Petrograd, on the third anniversary of the October Revolution, on November 7, 1920. Tens of thousands of workers, soldiers, students, and artists worked round the clock, living on kasha (the tasteless wheat porridge), tea, and frozen apples, and preparing the performance at the very place where the event 'really took place' three years earlier; their work was coordinated by army officers, as well as by avant-garde artists, musicians, and directors, from Malevich to Meyerhold. Although this was acting and not 'reality'—the soldiers and sailors were playing themselves—many of them not only actually participated in the event of 1917, but were also involved simultaneously in the real battles of the Civil War that were raging in the near vicinity of Petrograd, a city under siege and suffering from severe shortages of food. A contemporary commented on the performance: "The future historian will record how, throughout one of the bloodiest and most brutal revolutions, all of Russia was acting."¹⁵ And the formalist

¹⁵ Quoted from Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2000, p. 144.

theoretician Viktor Shklovsky noted that “some kind of elemental process is taking place where the living fabric of life is being transformed into the theatrical.”¹⁶

Why is liturgy necessary? Precisely because of the precedence of non-sense over sense: liturgy is the symbolic frame within which the zero-level of sense is articulated. The zero-experience of sense is not the experience of a determinate sense, but the absence of sense, more precisely: the frustrating experience of being sure that something has a sense, but not knowing what this sense is. *This vague presence of a non-specific sense is sense “as such,” sense at its purest*—it is primary, not secondary, that is, all determinate sense comes second, it is an attempt to fill in the oppressive presence-absence of the that-ness of sense without its what-ness. There is thus no opposition between liturgy (ceremony) and a historical opening/break: far from being an obstacle to change, liturgy keeps the space for radical change open, insofar as it sustains the signifying non-sense which calls for new inventions of (determinate) sense.

In other words, far from being an obstacle to the living experience of meaning, the presence of such “enigmatic signifiers” which emanate unknown meaning, that is, this very obstacle to a full transparency of meaning, is what makes a given symbolic space truly alive, engaged in a passionate struggle to unearth meaning, it is the ultimate source of its vitality. Once this obstacle is eliminated (or, rather, domesticated),

¹⁶ Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 144.

once we get fully accustomed to a symbolic space, so that this space loses its enigmatic opaqueness and starts to function in a totally smooth and transparent way, in a way it dies—as already Hegel knew, a system can die not only on account of external shocks that perturb its functioning, but also on account of its total “habituation”: “Human beings even die as result of habit—that is, if they have become totally habituated to life, and spiritually and physically blunted.”¹⁷

So what about the cases—exemplarily those of a modern subject being confronted by hieroglyphs—in which the signifier of which we know that it has a meaning without knowing what this meaning is, belongs to a past civilization in which its meaning was clearly understood? In such cases (analyzed by Eric Santner¹⁸), the enigmatic signifier is effectively not an index of vitality, but of the fact that a way of life is dead. In a powerful and perspicuous interpretive move, Santner links such experiences to Benjamin’s notion of “natural history” as *re-naturalized* history: it takes place when historical artifacts lose their meaningful vitality and are perceived as dead objects reclaimed by nature or, in the best case, as monuments of a past dead culture. (For Benjamin, it was in confronting such dead monuments of human history reclaimed by nature that we experience history at its purest.) The paradox here is that this re-naturalization overlaps with its

¹⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, § 151, Addition.

¹⁸ See Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2006.

opposite, with de-naturalization: since culture is for us our “second nature,” since we dwell in a living culture, experiencing culture as our natural habitat, the re-naturalization of cultural artifacts amounts to their *de*-naturalization: deprived of their function within a living totality of meaning, they dwell in an inter-space between nature and culture, between life and death, leading a ghost-like existence, belonging neither to nature nor to culture, appearing as something akin to the monstrosity of natural freaks, like a cow with two heads and three legs.

How, then, are we to distinguish these two modes of enigmatic signifiers: the signifiers which sustain the vitality of a symbolic space (their openness is turned towards the future, they trigger the generation of new meanings), and the signifiers which are the remainders of a dead symbolic space, that is, whose openness is turned towards the past (they are indeterminate because we no longer know their meaning)? A Kleinian approach would, of course, identify the latter as the ruins of the lost maternal body: we all live in the ruins of the maternal body which, in its incestuous totality, becomes prohibited upon our entrance into culture. (And does Lacan also not define the Name-of-the-Father, this enigmatic-empty signifier *par excellence*, as the metaphor of the desire of the mother, that is, as the signifying substitute of the primordially lost incestuous Object?) From this perspective, the signifier of death is primordial with regard to the signifier of vitality: all our productivity turned towards the future, all our attempts to generate new meanings, is ultimately

a form of appearance of its opposite, of a longing to regain the lost incestuous Thing—insofar as we dwell in culture, we effectively live among ruins, among the scattered fragments-remainders of the lost *jouissance*.

For this reason, *Parsifal* is the traumatic starting point which allows us to conceive of the multitude of later operas as reactions to it, as attempts to resolve its deadlock. The key among these attempts is, of course, Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, the ultimate pretender to the title "the last opera," the meta-opera about the conditions of (im)possibility of the opera: the sudden rupture at the end of Act II, after Moses' desperate "O Wort, das mir fehlt!," the failure to compose the work to the end. *Moses und Aron* is effectively anti-*Parsifal*: while *Parsifal* retains a full naive trust into the (redemptive) power of music, and finds no problems in rendering the noumenal divine dimension in the aesthetic spectacle of the ritual, *Moses und Aron* attempts the impossible: to be an opera directed against the very principle of opera, that of the stage-musical spectacle—it is an operatic representation of the Jewish prohibition of aesthetic representation.

Is the buoyant music of the Golden Calf not the ultimate version of the bacchanalia music in Wagner, from *Tannhäuser* to the Flower Maidens' music in *Parsifal*? And is there not another key parallel between *Parsifal* and *Moses und Aron*? As was noted by Adorno, the ultimate tension of *Moses* is not simply between divine transcendence and its representation in music, but, inherent to music itself, between the 'choral' spirit of the religious community and the two individuals

(Moses and Aron) who stick out as subjects; in the same way, in *Parsifal*, Amfortas and Parsifal himself stick out as forceful individuals—are the two “complaints” by Amfortas not the strongest passages of *Parsifal*, implicitly undermining the message of the renunciation to subjectivity? The musical opposition between the clear choral style of the Grail community and the chromaticism of the Klingsor universe in *Parsifal* is radicalized in *Moses und Aron* in the guise of the opposition between Moses’ *Sprechstimme* and Aron’s full song—in both cases, the tension is unresolved.

What one should always bear in mind apropos Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron* is that it is a sequel to another operatic project which, while dealing with the same problem, remained only a draft: *Der biblische Weg*, a musical drama about the fate of the Jewish people. In order to regain a new homeland, the Jews colonize an African country; when they are threatened by the rebellion of the indigenous population, they develop a new mysterious weapon of mass destruction (deadly rays which suffocate all living beings)—how are we to locate *this* fantasy, for the most part gracefully ignored in the literature on Schoenberg? Although, in the planned finale of the drama, Jews renounce the use of this weapon, this renunciation takes place in what is undoubtedly the weirdest case of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* of brutal destruction into spiritual conquest: the Jews promise that, instead of using the deadly rays, they will only radiate the spiritual power

of their pure belief—in short, the spread of their belief is the sublated form of the deadly chemical warfare...¹⁹

Schoenberg imagined a leader who would try to incorporate elements of Moses, the bearer of the divine message who had a speech impediment, and of Aron, a political activist who knew how to prepare the people for the fulfillment of their dreams, not shying away from the “performance of miracles,” and planning an actual fight for possession of the land. *Moses und Aron* thus follows *Der biblische Weg*: we get first the synthesis, then its failure. Max Aruns, the hero of *Weg*, is (as already the sound of his name indicates) the impossible synthesis of Moses and Aron, and, in Schoenberg’s development, “One divides itself into Two”: Max Aruns is split into Moses and Aron.

In Schoenberg’s play, the exiles first spend a period maturing in a land of preparation, as the Hebrews did in the desert. Schoenberg calls this land Asmongaea, and Max Aruns is promised protection and help for his people by the ruler of that country. In an exchange between Max Aruns (the astute political thinker) and a former skeptic, the dialogue has a prophetic ring: “People cannot take a position in a country inhabited by enemies,” says Aruns (who has chosen a kind of New Palestine as a territory for the ingathering of the exiles). In a rousing speech at the “Immigration Center,” Aruns asserts: “As He did for the Hebrews at Jericho, God has given us a powerful weapon with which to

¹⁹ See Arnold Schoenberg, “Der biblische Weg,” *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, vol. XVII, nos. 1–2 (1994), ed. Paul Zukofsky, pp. 162–328.

overpower our enemies: we have our own trumpets of Jericho! An invention [...] enables us to aim rays at any point around the globe, and at any distance rays which absorb the oxygen in the air and suffocate all living creatures.”²⁰ (This was written in 1926.) When relations with the host country get complicated, Jewish crowds revolt, Aruns is overpowered, and young Guido takes over the biblical Joshua’s role. He will lead the nation into the Promised Land; and

as little as we intend to send these newly discovered, death-carrying rays of material power to any point of this earth, as little as we intend to seek revenge or use violence against any nation, so much do we, on the contrary, intend to radiate [...] the world [with] the illuminating rays of our belief [...] so that they may bring forth new spiritual life. [...] We have an immediate goal: we want to feel secure as a nation. We want to be certain that no one can force us to do anything, that no one can hinder us from doing anything.²¹

The profound ambiguity of this solution is signaled by the very persistence of the signifier ‘radiation’: in a kind of mock-Hegelian *Aufhebung*, the chemical-warfare radiation is internalized and spiritualized into radiating onto others the Jewish spirituality. How, however, will they “feel secure as a nation” if not through some kind of military defense which will guarantee

²⁰ Ibid., p. 239.

²¹ Ibid., p. 327.

the place from which they will be able to radiate their spirituality? If nothing else, the Jews will have to rely on the death-carrying rays as a permanent threat guaranteeing their security: we do not intend ever to use them, but we have them.

What, then, can follow this breakdown? It is here that one is tempted to return to our starting point, to Rossinian comedy. After the complete breakdown of expressive subjectivity, comedy re-emerges—but a weird, uncanny one. What comes after *Moses und Aron* is the imbecilic 'comic' *Sprechgesang* of *Pierrot Lunaire*, the smile of a madman who is so devastated by pain that he cannot even perceive his tragedy—like the smile of a cat in cartoons with birds flying around its head after the cat gets hit on the head with a hammer. Comedy enters when the situation is too horrifying to be rendered as tragedy—which is why the only proper way to do a film about concentration camps is a comedy: there is something profoundly fake in making a concentration camp tragedy.

Wagner as a Theorist of Fascism

Perhaps, such a reading enables us also to cast a new light on the link between *Parsifal* and *The Ring*. In the unique figure of Hagen, *The Ring* provides the first portrait of what will later emerge as the Fascist leader; however, since the world of *The Ring* is caught in the Oedipal conflict of family passions, it cannot address the true problem of how the new humanity which

stares at us at the end, after the twilight of gods, is to organize itself, of how it should learn the truth about its place; *this* is the task of *Parsifal*, which therefore logically follows *The Ring*. The conflict between Oedipal dynamics and the post-Oedipal universe is inscribed within *Parsifal* itself: Klingsor and Amfortas' adventures are Oedipal. What happens with Parsifal's big turn (the rejection of Kundry) is precisely that he leaves behind the Oedipal incestuous eroticism, opening himself up to a new community.

The dark figure of Hagen is profoundly ambiguous: although initially depicted as a dark plotter, both in the *Nibelungenlied* and in Fritz Lang's film, he emerges as the ultimate hero and is redeemed at the end as the ultimate case of *Nibelungentreue*, the fidelity to one's cause onto death (or, rather, to the Master who stands for this cause), asserted in the final slaughter at the Attila's court. The conflict is here between fidelity to the Master and our everyday moral obligations: Hagen stands for a kind of teleological suspension of morality on behalf of fidelity, he is the ultimate *Gefolgsmann*.

Significantly, it is *only* Wagner who depicts Hagen as a figure of Evil—is this not an indication of how Wagner nonetheless belongs to the modern space of freedom? And is Lang's return to the positive Hagen not an indication of how the 20th century marked the reemergence of a new barbarism? It was Wagner's genius to intuit ahead of his time the rising figure of the ruthless Fascist executive who is at the same time a rabble-rousing demagogue (recall Hagen's terrifying *Männerruf*)—a worthy supplement to his other great intuition, that

of a hysterical woman (Kundry) well before this figure overwhelmed European consciousness in Jean-Martin Charcot's clinic, in the arts from Henrik Ibsen to Schoenberg.

What makes Hagen a 'proto-Fascist' is his role of unconditional support for the weak ruler (King Gunther): he does for Gunther the 'dirty jobs' which, although necessary, have to remain concealed from the public gaze—"Unsere Ehre heißt Treue." As such, Hagen is not 'Gunther's phallus'—it is rather Siegfried himself who obviously assumes this role in overcoming, taming, and raping Brünnhilde for him; what makes him phallic is the very fact that he acts as Gunther's spectral double. (When, in the recent German bestseller *Hagen von Tronje* by Wolfgang Hohlbein,²² Hagen is finally fully rehabilitated, one should not read this as an assertion of the Nazi authoritarianism, but rather as the rejection of Siegfried's hero cult: Hohlbein's Hagen is a complex person deeply in love with Kriemhild. In other words, what we get here is the 'psychologization' of Hagen as the price of his rehabilitation—something akin to what John Updike did in his *Gertrude and Claudius*.²³)

We find this stance, a kind of mirror-reversal of the Beautiful Soul which refuses to dirty its hands, exemplified in the Rightist admiration for the heroes who are ready to do the necessary dirty job: it is easy to do a noble thing for one's country, up to sacrificing one's

²² Wolfgang Hohlbein, *Hagen von Tronje: ein Nibelungen-Roman*, Wien: Carl Ueberreuter Verlag 1986.

²³ John Updike, *Gertrude and Claudius*, New York: Random House 2001.

life for it—it is much more difficult to commit a *crime* for one's country when it is needed. Hitler knew very well how to play this double game apropos the Holocaust, using Himmler as his Hagen. In the speech to the SS leaders in Posen on October 4, 1943, Himmler spoke quite openly about the mass killing of the Jews as “a glorious page in our history, and one that has never been written and never can be written,” explicitly including the killing of women and children: “I did not regard myself as justified in exterminating the men—that is to say, to kill them or have them killed—and to allow the avengers in the shape of children to grow up for our sons and grandchildren. The difficult decision had to be taken to have this people disappear from the earth.”²⁴

This is Hagen's *Treue* brought to its extreme—however, was the paradoxical price for Wagner's negative portrayal of Hagen not his *Judifizierung*? A lot of historicist work has been done recently trying to bring out the contextual ‘true meaning’ of the Wagnerian figures and topics: the pale Hagen is really a masturbating Jew; Amfortas' wound is really syphilis, etc. The idea is that Wagner is mobilizing historical codes known to everyone of his time: when a person stumbles, sings in cracking high tones, makes nervous gestures, etc., ‘everyone knew’ this is a Jew, so Mime from *Siegfried* is a caricature of a Jew; the fear of syphilis as the illness in the groin one gets from having intercourse with an ‘im-

²⁴ Heinrich Himmler, *Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945 und andere Ansprachen*, edited by Bradley F. Smith and Agnes F. Peterson, Berlin: Propyläen Verlag 1974, p. 169.

pure' woman was an obsession in the second half of the 19th century, so it was 'clear to everyone' that Amfortas really contracted syphilis from Kundry. Marc Weiner developed the most perspicuous version of this decoding by focusing on the micro-texture of Wagner's musical dramas—manner of singing, gestures, smells; it is at this level of what Deleuze would have called pre-subjective affects that anti-Semitism is operative in Wagner's operas, even if Jews are not explicitly mentioned: in the way Beckmesser sings, in the way Mime complains.

Marxism against Historicism

However, the first problem here is that, even if accurate, such insights do not contribute much to a pertinent understanding of the work in question. One often hears that in order to understand a work of art, one needs to know its historical context. Against this historicist commonplace, one should affirm that too much of a historical context can obscure proper contact with a work of art—in order to properly grasp, say, *Parsifal*, one should *abstract* from such historical trivia, one should *decontextualize* the work, tear it out of the context in which it was originally embedded. Even more, it is rather the work of art itself which provides a context enabling us to properly understand a given historical situation. If, today, someone were to visit Serbia, the direct contact with raw data there would leave him confused. If, however, he were to read a cou-

ple of literary works and see a couple of representative movies, they would provide the context that would enable him to locate and comprehend the raw data of his experience. There is thus an unexpected truth in the old cynical wisdom from the Stalinist Soviet Union: "he lies as an eye-witness!"

There is another, more fundamental, problem with such historicist decoding: it is not enough to 'decode' Alberich, Mime, Hagen etc. as Jews, making the point that the *Ring* is one big anti-Semitic tract, a story about how Jews, by renouncing love and opting for power, brought corruption to the universe; the more basic fact is that *the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew itself is not a direct ultimate referent, but already encoded, a cypher of ideological and social antagonisms*. (And the same goes for syphilis: in the second half of the 19th century, it was, together with tuberculosis, the other big case of "illness as a metaphor" (Susan Sontag),²⁵ serving as an encoded message about socio-sexual antagonisms, and this is the reason why people were so obsessed by it—not because of its direct real threat, but because of the ideological surplus-investment in it.) An appropriate reading of Wagner should take this fact into account and not merely 'decode' Alberich as a Jew, but also ask the question: *how does Wagner's encoding refer to the 'original' social antagonism of which the (anti-Semitic figure of the) 'Jew' itself is already a cypher?* What complicates the picture is thus its circular structure: while the figure of 'the Jew' is the referent encoded in Wagner's

²⁵ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1978.

condemnation of the lust for power and wealth, etc., the social content of the figure-cypher 'the Jew' is, again, the capitalist lust for wealth (what the reference to the 'Jewish plot' provides is a kind of naturalized false genealogy of capitalism). There is thus no need to search for another, 'deeper' content hidden beneath the figure of 'the Jew'—everything is here, one should only shift the perspective to capitalist dynamics, discern in it a cypher for this dynamic.

A further counter-argument is that Siegfried, Mime's opponent, is in no way simply the beautiful Aryan blond hero—his portrait is much more ambiguous. The short last scene of Act I of *The Twilight* (Siegfried's violent abduction of Brünnhilde; under the cover of a *Tarnhelm*, Siegfried poses as Gunther) is a shocking interlude of extreme brutality and ghost-like nightmarish quality. What makes it additionally interesting is one of the big inconsistencies of *The Ring*: why does Siegfried, after brutally subduing Brünnhilde, put his sword between the two when they lay down, to prove that they will not have sex, since he is just doing a service to his friend, the weak King Gunther? To whom does he have to prove this? Is Brünnhilde not supposed to think that he is Gunther? Before she is subdued, Brünnhilde displays to the masked Siegfried her hand with the ring on it, trusting that the ring will serve as protection; when Siegfried brutally tears the ring off her hand, this gesture has to be read as the repetition of the first extremely violent robbery of the ring in Scene 4 of *Rheingold*, when Wotan tears the ring from Alberich's finger. The horror of this scene is that

it shows Siegfried's brutality unadorned, in its raw state: it somehow 'depsychologizes' Siegfried, making him visible as an inhuman monster, that is, the way he 'really is,' deprived of his deceiving mask—*this* is the effect of the potion on him.²⁶

There is in Wagner's Siegfried an unconstrained 'innocent' aggressivity, an urge to pass directly to the act and wreak havoc what goes on the nerves—as in Siegfried's words to Mime in the Act I of *Siegfried*: "when I watch you standing, / shuffling and shambling, / servilely stooping, squinting and blinking, / I long to seize you by your nodding neck / and make an end of your obscene blinking!" (The sound of the original German is here even more impressive: "seh' ich dich stehn, gangeln und gehn, / knicken und nicken, / mit den Augen zwicken, / beim Genick möcht' ich den Nicker packen, / den Garausgeben dem garst'gen Zwicker!")²⁷ The same outburst is repeated twice in Act II: "Das eklige Nicken / und Augenzwicken, / wann endlich soll ich's / nicht mehr sehn, / wann werd' ich den Albern los?"²⁸ / "That shuffling and slinking, / those eyelids blinking—/ how long must I / endure the sight? / When shall I be rid of this fool?" and, just a little bit later: "Grade so garstig, / griesig und grau, / klein und krumm, / höckrig und hinkend, / mit hängenden Ohren, /

²⁶ Does Wotan's idea of Siegfried in the *Ring*—only a free human being conceived against the will of gods, not bound by their law, can redeem them of their guilt—not also point in the Christological dimension? Is Siegfried not the man who sacrifices himself for the guilt of gods?

²⁷ Richard Wagner, *Der Ring des Nibelungen. Siegfried*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1963, p. 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

triefen Augen—/ Fort mit dem Alb! / Ich mag ihn nicht mehr sehn.”²⁹—“Shuffling and slinking, / grizzled and gray, / small and crooked, / limping and hunchbacked, / with ears that are drooping, eyes that are bleary... / Off with the imp! I hope he’s gone for good!” Is this not the most elementary disgust, the ego’s repulsion when confronted with the intruding foreign body? One can easily imagine a neo-Nazi skin-head uttering just the same words in the face of a worn-out Turkish *Gastarbeiter*...³⁰

And, finally, one should not forget that, in the *Ring*, the source of all evil is not Alberich’s fatal choice in the first scene of *Rheingold*: long before this event took place, Wotan broke the natural balance, succumbing to the lure of power, giving preference to power over love—he pulled out and destroyed the World-Tree, making from it the spear on which he inscribed the runes fixating the laws of his rule, and he plucks out one of his own eyes in order to gain insight into inner truth. Evil thus does not come from the Outside—the insight of Wotan’s tragic “monologue with Brünnhilde” in the Act II of *Walküre* is that the power of Alberich and the prospect of the “end of the world” is ultimately Wotan’s own guilt, the result of his ethical fiasco—in Hegelese, external opposition is the effect of inner con-

²⁹ Ibid., p. 55.

³⁰ When, in his *Der Fall Wagner*, Nietzsche mockingly rejects Wagner’s universe, does his style not refer to these lines? Wagner himself was such a repulsive figure to him—and there is a kind of poetic justice in it, since Mime effectively is Wagner’s ironic self-portrait.

tradiction.³¹ No wonder, then, that Wotan is called the 'White Alb' in contrast to the 'Black Alb' Alberich—if anything, Wotan's choice was ethically worse than Alberich's: Alberich longed for love and only turned towards power after being brutally mocked and turned down by the Rhinemaidens, while Wotan turned to power after fully enjoying the fruits of love and getting tired of them. One should also bear in mind that, after his moral fiasco in *Walküre*, Wotan turns into 'Wanderer'—a figure of the Wandering Jew like already the first great Wagnerian hero, the Flying Dutchman, this "Ahasverus des Ozeans."

And the same goes for *Parsifal*, which is not about an elite circle of the pure-blooded threatened by external contamination (copulation by the Jewess Kundry). There are two complications to this image: first, Klingsor, the evil magician and Kundry's Master, is himself an ex-Grail knight, thus he comes from within; second, if one reads the text closely, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the true source of evil, the primordial imbalance which derailed the Grail community, resides

³¹ Bearing in mind Catherine Malabou's resuscitation of the notion of plasticity (*The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, London and New York: Routledge 2005) as the unity of informing and receiving form, of activity and passivity, of constancy and change, of necessity and contingency, one should reassert the deeper solidarity and continuity between Hegel and Wagner, beyond the standard (and rather boring, at that) critical point according to which the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a latter-day repetition, in the medium of arts, of the Hegelian all-encompassing System of Absolute Knowing. Hegel and Wagner share the thorough plasticity of their works: what is Wagner's 'unending melody' with its continuous transformation of motifs into each other, with its unique combination of continuity and cuts, of a development following its inner necessity and unforeseeable eruptions of the new, if not artistic plasticity at its utmost?

at its very core—it is Titurel's excessive fixation on enjoying the Grail that marks the origin of the misfortune. The true figure of Evil is Titurel, this obscene *père-jouisseur* (perhaps comparable to giant worm-like members of the Space Guild from Frank Herbert's science fiction saga *Dune*, whose bodies are disgustingly distorted because of their excessive consumption of the 'spice'). In Nikolaus Lehnhoff's superb *English National Opera* production of *Parsifal*,³² which takes place in a desolate post-catastrophic grey and dusty environment, Titurel emerges from the square hole in the ground; he is a frog-like monster, covered overall with green-gray scales, with skin between the three long claws on each hand, and a gigantic twisted snout of a mouth, obviously modeled after the "creature from the black lagoon" from the famous low-budget horror classic from the early 1950s. And Titurel indeed is a kind of "creature from the black lagoon," a disgusting deformed creature that, from time to time, crawls to the surface from some unidentified dark subterranean domain, repeating all the time the same message, a cruel demand on his wounded son Amfortas to perform the ritual and unveil the Grail, so that this obscene creature of a father can get a portion of his obscene *jouissance*. If anyone is tempted to dismiss such a reading of *Parsifal* as yet another 'postmodern' funny falsification ("Is it not obvious that Titurel is a figure of saintly purity, totally dedicated to the Grail?"), suffice it to bear in mind an obvious fact: there is no compassion (*Mitleid*)

³² Released on DVD in 2005.

in this figure when it cruelly insists on its demand, ignoring Amfortas' desperate pleas and protestations of unbearable pain: "I don't care about it—just do your job and perform the ritual!"—and this lack of compassion, this brutal insensitivity to pain, occurs in *Parsifal*, which is *the* highest celebration of the redeeming role of compassion (*"durch Mitleid wissend"*—arriving at crucial knowledge through compassion). Another cliché is to be dispelled here: the notion that the decaying Grail community stands for the ossified ideological institution drained of life. The true problem with the Grail community in *Parsifal* is that it contains *too much* life—not, of course, the ordinary life, but an 'unhealthy' obscene life embodied in Titurel, in the uncanny 'undeadness' of this living dead.

This, then, undermines the anti-Semitic perspective according to which the disturbance always ultimately comes from outside, in the guise of a foreign body which throws out of joint the balance of the social organism: for Wagner, the external intruder (Alberich) is just a secondary repetition, externalization, of an absolutely immanent inconsistency/antagonism (of Wotan). With reference to Brecht's famous "What is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank?" one is tempted to say: "What is a poor Jew's stealing of the gold compared to the violence of the Aryan's (Wotan's) grounding of the rule of Law?"

This brings us back to Wagner's anti-Semitism: when Wagner is defended along the lines of "One should not judge works of the 19th century retroactively, casting back on them the shadow of the Holocaust,"

the reply should be that, here, precisely, one should apply Benjamin's notion that some texts are like unfinished traces or undeveloped films which become fully readable only afterwards, in a later epoch wherein their consequences are actualized. Anti-Semitism is not the hidden ultimate "truth" of Wagner's universe: first, it is not hidden, it is openly displayed, out there for everyone to see; second, even when the anti-Semitic message is discernible in his work, Wagner undermines it, achieves distance from it, through his very artistic practice. Mime may be the portrait of a repulsive Jew contrasted to the heroic youth and strength of Siegfried, but is Siegfried's brutal display of repulsion at Mime not (implicitly, at least) presented as repulsive in itself? The third and crucial moment: let us not forget that the first full-blooded Wagnerian hero, finding himself in the archetypal Wagnerian position of being undead, condemned to endless wandering, unable to find (and longing for) redemption in death, is the Flying Dutchman, clearly a Jewish figure, modeled on Ahasver, the Wandering Jew (and, incidentally, the main source for it being Heine, a Jewish poet!). All other Wagnerian heroes are variations of the Dutchman, including Lohengrin (is he also not waiting restless in Montsalvat for the call of a lady in need from whom he expects to be redeemed from the boring and sterile life there, from "Montsalvat's frigid joys"?), Wotan turned into Wanderer, and Kundry herself as the wandering Jewess (this, perhaps, is how one should read the mysterious "redemption to the Redeemer" from the finale of *Parsifal*: what if one refers this formula to Kundry, the

woman-redemptrix who should be redeemed?³³). One can effectively imagine Lohengrin in a parallel with Holländer: is he also not in a kind of limbo at Montsalvat, in a situation not so different from the wandering around of Holländer, desperately waiting for a dame in distress to call for him so that he can escape the monotony of Montsalvat? One can well imagine him singing his version of Holländer's "Die Frist ist um...", be-moaning his fate and longing for a woman who would not ask him the fateful question. And, in a way similar to Holländer's, once involved with a woman, he secretly longs for her to ask the prohibited question, unable to confront the prospect of dull married life, glad to perform again the dignified withdrawal after telling the gathered crowd who he is.

In *Lohengrin*, one should insist on the opposition between 'must' and 'ought,' *müssen* and *sollen*. When Lohengrin enjoins Elsa "Nie sollst du mich befragen!",³⁴ we are dealing here with the moral injunction prohibition—not "you must not!" but "you ought not!" (or "you should not!"). Elsa's asking the question is on a different level, that of 'must'—she 'cannot but' ask it, she cannot do otherwise, it is her fundamental character, she is compelled by an inexorable drive (which is the very Freudian *Trieb*) to ask it. 'Must' and 'ought' thus relate as the Real and the Symbolic: the Must as the Real of a drive whose injunction cannot be avoided (which is

³³ Furthermore, what if we read the three figures of Kundry (in Act I the naive helper, in Act II the seductress, in Act III the repented servant) along the lines of the classic motif of three women—three caskets?

³⁴ Richard Wagner, *Lohengrin*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1966, p. 21.

why Lacan says that the status of a drive is ethical); the Ought as a symbolic ideal caught in the dialectic of desire (if you ought not do something, this very prohibition generates the desire to do it). When you 'must' do something, it means you have no choice but to do it, even if it is unpleasant, even if horrible: Wotan is cornered by Fricka and he 'must' ('cannot but') allow the murder of Siegmund, although his heart bleeds for him; he 'must' ('cannot but') punish Brünnhilde, his dearest child, the embodiment of his own innermost striving.³⁵ Wagner encounters here the paradox of the 'killing with *pietà*' at work from the Talmud (which calls us to dispense Justice with Love) to Brecht's two key *Lehrstücke*, *Der Jasager* (*The Yes Sayer*) and *Die Maßnahme* (*The Decision*), in which the young comrade is killed by his companions with loving tenderness.

Love and its Vicissitudes

Das Rheingold is Wagner's only *pure* musical drama—at two places in *Die Walküre*, opera already reemerges at its most glorious, as a male aria—Siegmund's "Winterstürme wichen" and Wotan's "Der Augen leuchtendes Paar." It is easy to imagine both sung as popular songs. (At least, in the first case, the 'aria' gradually changes

³⁵ The truth of Nietzsche's biting remark that all Wagnerian heroines are versions of Madame Bovary is fully confirmed if one takes a glance at the second act of *Die Walküre*: isn't there something inherently comic in how, after larger-than-life battles, Wotan is afraid to face his wife's wrath? And does the same not go for *The Twilight of Gods*, where Siegfried is brought down by family plotting? (The same pattern is already discernible in *Lohengrin*.)

into a properly Wagnerian musical drama.) *Das Rheingold* is Wagner 'as such,' at his purest, or put in Hegel-ese, 'in his notion' (*in seinem Begriff*). It is unique in that it is the only pure example of Wagner's theory of musical drama, the piece wherein Wagner fully respected his own rules, as elaborated in *Opera and Drama*; with *Die Walküre*, the "human, all too human" passion (and operatic aria!) (re)emerges forcefully and explodes the constraints of Wagner's theoretical edifice. No wonder *Rheingold* takes place only among gods, monsters and dwarfs, with no humans at all (and, according to Wagner's Feuerbachian notion, in this epoch, humanity is the only reality): *Rheingold* is a kind of virtual pre-ontological theatre, providing for us a display of pure potentialities (the divine, the monstrous...) prior to the emergence of the actual human world.³⁶ The whole tetralogy then follows a precise inner logic: *Siegfried* returns to the innocent fairy-tale magic, while *The Twilight* throws us into the vulgar universe of political intrigues and power plays. There is a kind of Greimasian square here: an axis opposes *Rheingold* and *Siegfried* to *Walküre* and *Twilight*. Furthermore, there is a parallel between *Walküre* and *Twilight*: in both cases, Act I finishes with a sex-act situation (with the act consummated in the first case, renounced in the second).

³⁶ The passage, at the beginning of the *Rheingold*, from the orchestral interlude to the singing of the Rhinemaidens should be done properly: a cut and at the same time continuity, that is, a totally inherent explosion/inversion, a release of inner tension. (The same goes for Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, the passage, at the end, from "Baba Yaga" to "The Great Kiev Doors.")

It is a commonplace of Wagner studies that the triumphant finale of *Das Rheingold* is a fake, an empty triumph indicating the fragility of the gods' power and their forthcoming downfall—however, does the same not go also for the finale of *Siegfried*? Furthermore, is the finale of *Das Rheingold* really shallow, built on fragile foundations and thus doomed to fail? What if it is precisely this fragile character that provides the tone of tragic grandeur to it? What if it is so efficient not in spite of but *because of* its fragility? The sublime duet of Brünnhilde and Siegfried, which concludes the opera, fails a couple of minutes before the ending, with the entry of the motif announcing the couple's triumphant reunion (usually designated as the motif of "happy love" or "love's bond"), but this motif is obviously a fake (not to mention the miserable failure of the concluding noisy-bombastic orchestral *tutti*, which lacks the efficiency of the gods' entry to Walhalla in *Rheingold*). Does this failure encode Wagner's (unconscious?) critique of *Siegfried*? Recall the additional curious fact that this motif is almost the same as—or closely related to—the Beckmesser motif in *Meistersinger* (I owe this insight to Gerhard Koch; Act III of *Siegfried* was written just after *Meistersinger*)! Furthermore, does not this empty bombastic failure of the final notes also signal the catastrophe-to-come of Brünnhilde and Siegfried's love? As such, this 'failure' of the duet is a structural necessity.³⁷ One should nonetheless follow closely

³⁷ This love-duet is also one of the Verdi-relapses in Wagner (the best known being the revenge-trio that concludes the Act III of *The Twilight*, apropos which already Bernard Shaw remarked that it sounds like the trio of the

the inner triadic structure of this duet: its entire dynamic is on the side of Brünnhilde who twice shifts her subjective stance, while Siegfried remains the same. First, from her elevated divine position, Brünnhilde joyously asserts her love for Siegfried; then, once she becomes aware of what Siegfried's passionate advances mean—the loss of her safety and distance—she displays fear of losing her identity, of descending to the level of a vulnerable mortal woman, man's prey and passive victim. In a wonderful metaphor, she compares herself to a beautiful image in the water which gets blurred once man's hand directly touches and disturbs the water. Finally, she surrenders to Siegfried's passionate love advances and throws herself into the vortex. However, with the exception of its final notes, Act III of *Siegfried*—at least from the moment when Siegfried breaks Wotan's spear to Brünnhilde's awakening—is not only unbearably beautiful, but also the most concise statement of the Oedipal problematic in its specific Wagnerian twist.³⁸

On his way to the magic mountain where Brünnhilde lies, surrounded by a wall of fire which can be traversed only by a hero who does not know fear, Siegfried first encounters Wotan, the deposed (or, rather,

conspirators from *Un ballo in maschera*).—Gutman designated it as a farewell to music drama towards the “rediscovered goal of the ultimate grand opera” (Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner*, London and New York: Penguin Books 1968, p. 299).

³⁸ Does the couple of Guttrune (Kriemhild) and Brünnhilde not belong to the series, which starts with Antigone and Brünnhilde, of a cold ‘inhuman’ woman accompanied by her ‘human’ passionate/pathological shadow (Juliette and Justine, Gudrun Ensslin and her sister)?

abdicated) supreme god, disguised as a Wanderer; Wotan tries to stop him, but in an ambiguous way—basically, he *wants* Siegfried to break his spear. After Siegfried disrespectfully does this, full of contempt, in his ignorance, for the embittered and wise old man, he progresses through the flames and perceives a wonderful creature lying there in deep sleep. Thinking that the armored plate on the creature's chest is making its breathing difficult, he proceeds to cut off its straps with his sword; after he raises the plate and sees Brünnhilde's breasts, he utters a desperate cry of surprise: "*Das ist kein Mann! / This is no man!*"³⁹ This reaction, of course, cannot but strike us as comic, exaggerated beyond credulity. However, one should bear in mind a couple of things here. First, the whole point of the story of *Siegfried* till this moment is that while Siegfried spent his entire youth in the forest in the sole company of the evil dwarf Mime who claimed to be his only parent, mother-father, he nonetheless observed that, in the case of animals, parents always form a couple, and he thus longs to see his mother, the feminine counterpart of Mime. Siegfried's quest for a woman is thus a quest for sexual difference, and the fact that this quest is at the same time the quest for fear, for an experience that would teach him what fear is, clearly points in the direction of castration—with a specific twist. In the paradigmatic Freudian description of the scene of castration (in his late short text on "Fetishism"), the gaze discovers an absence where a presence (of penis) is

³⁹ Wagner, *Der Ring des Nibelungen. Siegfried*, p. 84.

expected, while here, Siegfried's gaze discovers an excessive presence (of breasts—and one should add that the typical Wagnerian soprano is an opulent soprano with large breasts, so that Siegfried's "Das ist kein Mann!" usually gives rise to a hearty laughter in the audience?).⁴⁰

Secondly, one should bear in mind here an apparent inconsistency in the libretto which points the way to a proper understanding of this scene: why is Siegfried so surprised at not encountering a man, when, just prior, he emphasizes that he wants to penetrate the fire precisely in order to find a woman there? To the Wanderer, he says: "Give ground then, for that way, I know, leads to the sleeping woman."⁴¹ And, a couple of minutes later: "Go back yourself, braggart! I must go there, to the burning heart of the blaze, to Brünnhilde!"⁴² From this, one should draw the only possible conclusion: *while Siegfried was effectively looking for a woman, he did not expect her not to be a man*. In short, he was looking for a woman who would be—not the same as man, but—a symmetric supplement to man, with whom she would form a balanced signifying dyad. And what he found instead was an unbearable lack/excess. What he discovered is the excess/lack not covered by the binary signifier, that is, the fact that Woman and Man are not complementary but asymmetrical,

⁴⁰ As if referring to this scene, Jacques-Alain Miller once engaged in a thought experiment, enumerating other possible operators of sexual difference that could replace the absence/presence of penis, and mentions the absence/presence of breasts.

⁴¹ Wagner, *Der Ring des Nibelungen. Siegfried*, p. 80.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

that there is no yin-yang balance—in short, that there is no sexual relationship.

No wonder, then, that Siegfried's discovery that Brünnhilde "is no man" gives rise to an outburst of true panic accompanied by a loss of reality, in which Siegfried takes refuge with his (to him unknown) mother: "That's no man! A searing spell pierces my heart; a fiery anxiety fills my eyes; my senses swim and swoon! Whom can I call on to help me? Mother, mother! Think of me!"⁴³ He then gathers all his courage and decides to kiss the sleeping woman on her lips, even if this will mean his own death: "Then I will suck life from those sweetest lips, *though I die in doing so*."⁴⁴ What follows is the majestic awakening of Brünnhilde and then the love duet which concludes the opera.—It is crucial to note that this acceptance of death as the price for contacting the feminine Other is accompanied musically by the echo of the so-called motif of "renunciation," arguably the most important leitmotif in the entire tetralogy. This motif is first heard in the Scene I of *Rheingold*, when, answering Alberich's query, Woglinde discloses that "nur wer der Minne Macht entsagt / only the one who renounces the power of love/" can take possession of the gold; its next most noticeable appearance occurs towards the end of Act I of *Walküre*, at the moment of the most triumphant assertion of love between Sieglinde and Siegmund—just prior to his pulling the sword from the tree trunk,

⁴³ Ibid., p. 85.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 86.

Siegmond sings to it the words: "Heiligster Minne höchste Not / Holiest love's highest need."⁴⁵ How are we to read these two occurrences together? What if one treats them as two fragments of a complete sentence that was distorted by *dreamwork*, that is, rendered unreadable by being split into two—the solution is thus to reconstitute the complete proposition: "Love's highest need is to renounce its own power." This is what Lacan calls "symbolic castration": if one is to remain faithful to one's love, one should not elevate it to the direct focus of one's love, one should instead renounce its centrality. Perhaps, a detour through the best (or worst) of Hollywood melodrama can help us to clarify this point. The basic lesson of Charles Vidor's musical romance drama film *Rhapsody* (1954) is that, in order to gain the beloved woman's love, the man has to prove that he is able to survive without her, that he prefers his mission or profession to her. There are two immediate choices: (1) my professional career is what matters most to me, the woman is just an amusement, a distracting affair; (2) the woman is everything to me, I am ready to humiliate myself, to forsake all my public and professional dignity for her. These are both false, and they lead to the man being rejected by the woman. The message of true love is thus: even if you are everything to me, I can survive without you, I am ready to forsake you for my mission or profession. The proper way for the woman to test the man's love is thus to 'be-

⁴⁵ Richard Wagner, *Der Ring des Nibelungen. Die Walküre*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1965, p. 28.

tray' him at the crucial moment of his career (the first public concert in the film, the key exam, the business negotiation which will decide his career). Only if he can survive the ordeal and accomplish his task successfully—while deeply traumatized by her desertion,—will he deserve her and will she return to him. The underlying paradox is that love, precisely as the Absolute, should not be posited as a direct goal—it should retain the status of a by-product, of something we get as an undeserved grace. Perhaps, there is no greater love than that of a revolutionary couple, where each of the two lovers is ready to abandon the other at any moment if revolution demands it.

What, then, happens when Siegfried kisses the sleeping Brünnhilde, so that this act deserves to be accompanied by the Renunciation motif? What Siegfried says is that he will kiss Brünnhilde "*though I die in doing so*"⁴⁶—reaching out to the Other Sex involves accepting one's mortality. Recall here another sublime moment from *The Ring*: the duet of Siegmund and Brünnhilde towards the end of Act II of *Walküre*, when Brünnhilde in her cold majestic beauty approaches Siegmund, informing him that every mortal who sees her will soon die—she is here to tell him that she will take him to Walhalla, the eternal dwelling place of dead heroes, after he loses the battle with Hunding. Siegmund refuses her offer if Sieglinde cannot join him in Walhalla, preferring the love of a miserable mortal woman to "Walhalla's frigid joys / *Walhalls*

⁴⁶ Wagner, *Der Ring der Nibelungen. Siegfried*, p. 86.

spröde Wonnen.”⁴⁷ Siegmund here literally renounces immortality—is this not the highest ethical act of all? The shattered Brünnhilde comments on this refusal: “So little do you value everlasting bliss? Is she everything to you, this poor woman who, tired and sorrowful, lies limp in your lap? Do you think nothing less glorious?”⁴⁸ Ernst Bloch was right to remark that what is lacking in German history are more gestures like Siegmund’s.⁴⁹

But which *love* is here renounced? To put it bluntly: the incestuous maternal love. The “fearless hero” is fearless insofar as he experiences himself as protected by his mother, by the maternal envelope—what “learning to fear” effectively amounts to is learning that one is exposed to the world without any maternal shield. It is essential to read this scene in conjunction with the scene, from *Parsifal*, of Kundry giving a kiss to Parsifal: in both cases, an innocent hero discovers fear and/or

⁴⁷ Wagner, *Der Ring des Nibelungen. Walküre*, p. 55.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴⁹ With regard to his Germanness, Wagner occupies a special place among great composers. Apropos Tchaikovsky, Richard Taruskin aptly characterized the double bind predicament of the composers from the ‘peripheral’ countries (Eastern Europe, Scandinavia): the very vehicle which sustains their international appeal (their national roots) is at the same time the guarantee of their secondary status with regard to the unmarked ‘universal’ composers (from Germany, Italy, or France). (Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, Princeton: Princeton UP 1997, p. 48.) In other words, the very feature which sustains their inclusion *in* the Canon commits them to the secondary status *within* the Canon. If a great ‘universal’ composer was a ferocious nationalist, this is as a rule dismissed as secondary, ultimately irrelevant, while, even if a ‘peripheral’ composer is not a nationalist, this absence is perceived not as the sign of his universality, but as a sign of his troubled relationship towards his ethnic group. The big exception here is Wagner: although he is the ‘big’ composer, his national roots *do* matter in his case—and this is what makes him ideologically suspicious.

suffering through a kiss located somewhere between the maternal and the properly feminine. Till the late 19th century, a weird wedding night ritual was practiced in Montenegro: in the evening after the marriage ceremony, the son gets into bed with his mother and, after he falls asleep, the mother silently withdraws and lets the bride take her place: after spending the rest of the night with the bride, the son has to escape from the village into a mountain and spend a couple of days alone there, in order to get accustomed to the shame of being married. Does something homologous not happen to Siegfried?

However, the difference between *Siegfried* and *Parsifal* is that, in the first case, the woman is accepted; in the second, she is rejected. This does not mean that the feminine dimension disappears in *Parsifal*, and that we remain within the homoerotic male community of the Grail. Syberberg was right when, after Parsifal's rejection of Kundry which follows her kiss, "the last kiss of the mother and the first kiss of a woman," he replaced Parsifal-the-boy with another actor, a young cold woman—did he thereby not enact the Freudian insight according to which identification is, at its most radical, identification with the lost (or rejected) libidinal object? We *become* (identify with) the *object* of which we were deprived, so that our subjective identity becomes a repository of the traces of our lost objects. What this means is that the conflict in *Parsifal* is not between sexuality and spirituality, and also not (as it is sometimes claimed) between heterosexuality and the closed homosexual community (as, so the story goes,

the libidinal foundation of a totalitarian community). It is rather the conflict between intersubjective desire on the one hand, and on the other, a partial drive caught in its closed circuit of *jouissance*: Montsalvat is a perverse paradise of a partial drive making its circuit around the Object.⁵⁰

Parsifal as a Learning Play

However, is the reading of *Parsifal*'s finale as that of a hysterical identification with the object the only consistent one? The problematic nature of Nietzsche's critique of *Parsifal* indicates that Wagner's last work is full of surprises: is the scene (the *dispositif*) of Nietzsche's critique of Wagner not already staged in Wagner's *Parsifal*? No wonder *Parsifal* provoked in Nietzsche such a strange mixture of rage and admiration. Klingsor's kingdom fits perfectly Nietzsche's notion of Wagner: an impotent hypnotic Master manipulating hysterical women and thus seducing the public; and a hero without guilt who leads—against this kingdom and its musical aspect (chromaticism, immersion into the endless and formless flow lacking proper or inner form)—the Grail community, reasserting firm marching rhythms and heroic hierarchic relations. Nietzsche's critique of Wagner is thus effectively a case of 'the frame itself being part of the enframed content': the very frame of

⁵⁰ So what about Syberberg's film version that stages Amfortas' wound itself as a vaginal partial object? Is its irony not that vagina itself, the feminine 'threat' to masculine identity, is reduced to a fetishist partial object?

Nietzsche's critique is already staged in the criticized content.⁵¹ It is thus all too easy to conceive of Nietzsche's break with Wagner as the passage from the sentimental to the naive (in Schiller's sense), which is at the same time the passage from late Romanticism to modernity proper. What this notion obfuscates is the hidden sentimentality (and therefore faked nature) of Nietzsche's naivety itself.

What, then, if *Parsifal* also points in another direction, that of the emergence of a new collective? If *Tristan* enacts redemption as the ecstatic suicidal escape *from* the social order and *Meistersinger* the resigned integration *into* the existing social order, then *Parsifal* concludes with the invention of a new form of the Social. With Parsifal's "Disclose the Grail!" ("Enthüllet den Gral!"),⁵² we pass from the Grail community as a closed order where the Grail is only revealed, in the prescribed time of a ritual, to the circle of the initiated, to a new order in which the Grail must remain revealed all the time: "No more shall the shrine be sealed!" ("Nicht soll der mehr verschlossen sein!").⁵³ This, perhaps, is the only truly Christian moment of *Parsifal*: the permanent shining of the Grail turns it into a *lux aeterna*, breaking with the pagan circular movement of disclosure and

⁵¹ It is easy to demonstrate the inner split of Nietzsche's relationship to Wagner, that is, how his vicious attacks on Wagner bears witness to the fact that Nietzsche was not able to step out of Wagner's shadow; however, in spite of (or, rather, on account of) this split, Nietzsche's subjective position was much more authentic than the assured self-reliance of the late Wagner.

⁵² Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1963, p. 59.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 60.

withdrawal.⁵⁴ As for the revolutionary consequences of this change, recall the fate of the Master figure in the triad *Tristan-Meistersinger-Parsifal* (King Marke, Hans Sachs, Amfortas): in the first two works, the Master survives as a saddened melancholic figure, while in the third he is *deposed* and dies.

Why, then, should we not read *Parsifal* from today's perspective: the kingdom of Klingsor in Act II is a domain of digital phantasmagoria, of virtual amusement—Harry Kupfer was right to stage Klingsor's magic garden as a video parlor, with Flower Girls reduced to fragments of female bodies (faces, legs...) appearing on dispersed TV screens.⁵⁵ Is Klingsor not a kind of Master of the Matrix, a combination of Murdoch and Bill Gates, skilfully manipulating virtual reality? And when we pass from Act II to Act III, do we not effectively pass from the fake virtual reality to the 'desert of the real,' the 'waste land' in the aftermath of ecological catastrophe which derailed the 'normal' functioning of nature. Is *Parsifal* not a model for Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*, with Samuel Jackson in the role of Gurnemanz?⁵⁶

⁵⁴ It is the myth of *Hamlet* whose structure is basically pagan (the "circle of life," as they put it in *The Lion King*, the circular movement of the order disturbed by the uncle and the balance reestablished by the son), while *Oedipus* (as Jean-Joseph Goux made it clear) is a strange exception among myths, the atypical myth in which the normal course of things is interrupted.

⁵⁵ *Parsifal*, staged by Harry Kupfer, Artistic Director: Daniel Barenboim, Berlin State Opera in 1992.

⁵⁶ What if—along the same lines—the entire action of *Siegfried* and *Twilight* is Brünnhilde's dream, while she is sleeping surrounded by fire? When, twice afterwards (at the end of *Siegfried* and *Twilight*) fire appears in her dream, she incorporates into the dream the external stimuli of fire raging all the time around her. And the traumatic last scene of the Act I of *Twilight* is the moment

One is thus tempted to offer a direct 'vulgar' answer to the question: what the hell was Parsifal doing on his journey in the long time which passes between Acts II and III? The true 'Grail' are the people, their suffering. What if Parsifal simply got acquainted with human misery, suffering, and exploitation? So what if the *new* collective is something like a revolutionary party, what if one takes the risk of reading *Parsifal* as the precursor of Brecht's *Lehrstücke*, what if its topic of sacrifice points towards that of Brecht's *Die Maßnahme* (*The Decision*), which was put to music by Hanns Eisler, the third great pupil of Schoenberg, after Berg and Webern? The topic of both *Parsifal* and *Die Maßnahme* indeed seems to be *learning* itself: the hero has to learn how to help people in their suffering. The outcome, however, is the opposite: in Wagner compassion, in Brecht/Eisler the strength not to give way to one's compassion and directly act on it. However, this opposition itself is relative: the shared motif is that of *distanced compassion*. The lesson of Brecht is the art of *cold* compassion, compassion with suffering that learns to resist the immediate urge to help others; the lesson of Wagner is *cold compassion*, the distanced saintly attitude (recall the cold girl into which Parsifal turns in Syberberg's version) which nonetheless retains sympathy. Wagner's lesson (and Wotan's insight) about how the greatest act of freedom is to accept and freely enact what necessarily has to occur, is strangely echoed in

of the disintegration of the fantasy, a brutal inconsistent ambiguity—she then quickly concocts the complex narrative of the Act II in order to account for this traumatic intrusion.

the basic lesson of Brecht's 'learning plays': what the young boy to be killed by his colleagues has to learn is the art of *Einverständnis*, of accepting his own killing, which will occur anyway.

And what about the misogyny that obviously sustains this option? Is it not that *Parsifal* negated the shared presupposition of the first two works, their assertion of love (ecstatic courtly love, marital love), opting for the exclusively male community? However, what if, here too, Syberberg was right: after Kundry's kiss, in the very rejection of (hysterical-seductive) femininity, Parsifal turns into a woman, adopts a feminine subjective position? What if what we effectively get is a dedicated 'radical' community led by a cold ruthless woman, a new Joan of Arc?

And what about the notion that the Grail community is an elitist closed initiatic circle? Parsifal's final injunction to disclose the Grail undermines this false alternative of elitism/populism: every true elitism is universal, addressed to everyone and all, and there is something inherently vulgar about initiations and secret gnostic wisdom. There is a standard complaint of numerous *Parsifal* lovers: a great opera with numerous passages of breathtaking beauty—but, nonetheless, the two long narratives of Gurnemanz (taking most of the first half of Acts I and III) represent Wagner at his worst, offering a boring recapitulation of deeds already known to us, lacking any dramatic tension. Our proposed 'Communist' reading of *Parsifal* entails a full rehabilitation of these two narratives as crucial moments of the opera—the fact that they may appear 'boring' is

to be understood along the lines of a short poem of Brecht's from the early 1950s, addressed to a nameless worker in the *German Democratic Republic* who, after long hours of work, is obliged to listen to a boring political speech by a local party functionary: "You are exhausted from long work / The speaker is repeating himself / His speech is long-winded, he speaks with strain / Do not forget, tired one: / He speaks the truth."⁵⁷ This is the role of Gurnemanz—no more and no less than the agent—the mouthpiece, even—of truth. In this precise case, the very predicate 'boring' is an indicator (a vector) of truth, as opposed to the dazzling perplexity of jokes and superficial amusements. There is, of course, another sense in which, as Brecht knew very well, dialectics itself is inherently comical.

With regard to the general economy of Wagner's work, are the long narratives that interrupt the flow of events especially in late Wagner's operas—where the singer recapitulates what went on before the opera or in the previous opera or act—are these narratives really a *symptom* of Wagner, a symptom of the inherent failure of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* project? Thus instead of the organic *Darstellung*, the direct rendering of the events, we get the artificial *Vorstellung*, mere representation.⁵⁸ What if they obey a very precise performative logic of the "declarative"? One does something, one counts oneself as (declares oneself to be) the one who

⁵⁷ Bertolt Brecht, *Die Gedichte in einem Band*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1999, p. 1005.

⁵⁸ For this idea, see David J. Levin, *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998.

did it, and, on the basis of this declaration, one does something *new*—the proper moment of subjective transformation occurs at the moment of declaration, not at the moment of act. In other words, the truly New emerges through self-narration, the apparently purely reproductive re-telling of what already happened—it is this retelling that opens up the space (the very possibility) of acting in a new way. Furious about his misery, a worker explodes against his master (participates in a wild strike, etc.). However, it is only in the aftermath of his explosion, when he recounts it as an act of class struggle that he subjectively transforms himself into the revolutionary subject, and it is on the basis of this transformation that he can go on acting as a true revolutionary. Nowhere is this ‘performative’ role of re-telling more palpable than in what idiots consider the most boring passages of Wagner’s musical dramas, the long narratives in which the hero recapitulates what went on till that point. As Alain Badiou has pointed out,⁵⁹ these long narratives are the true sites of dramatic shift—in following their course, we witness the narrator’s profound subjective transformation.⁶⁰ Exemplary here is Wotan’s great monologue in Act II of *Walküre*: the Wotan who emerges as the result of his own narrative is not the same Wotan as the one who embarked upon it, but a Wotan who has decided to act in a new way—Wotan sees and accepts his ultimate

⁵⁹ In his seminar on Wagner at *École normale supérieure* in Paris, May 14, 2005.

⁶⁰ This is why Adorno was wrong when, in a Nietzschean mode, he wrote that Wagner’s work is theatrical but not dramatic: he missed the key dramatic impact of the long Wagnerian narratives.

failure, and *decides to desire* his own end.⁶¹ And, as Badiou has noted, it is the role of musical texture that is crucial here: it is the music that transforms (what may sound like) a mere report on events and the state of the world into the deployment of the subjective metamorphosis of the narrator himself. One can also see how right Wagner was to reduce the actual act (battle, usually) to an insignificant occurrence to be disposed of quickly, preferably even off stage (as is the case, at the beginning of the Act II of *Parsifal*, with Parsifal's fight with and victory over Klingsor's knights: it takes place off stage, we only here the report on Parsifal's progress by Klingsor who observes the fight from afar): it is impossible not to note how strangely the brevity of actual fights in Wagner's works (the brief duel between Lohengrin and Telramund in the Act III of *Lohengrin*; the duel between Tristan and Melot at the end of Act III of *Tristan*, not to mention the ridiculous fights at the end of *Tristan*) contrasts with the long duration of narratives and declarations.

And what about the final call of the Chorus in *Parsifal*: "Erlösung dem Erlöser",⁶² "Redeem the Redeemer!" which some read as the anti-Semitic statement "redeem/save Christ from the clutches of the Jewish tradi-

⁶¹ The very exceptions are here tell-tale, and we find them at the opposite end of Wagner's oeuvre: the Flying Dutchman's self-presentation in Act I is just this, it entails no subjective change, which is why we are still dealing with a traditional aria; the long reports of Gurnemanz in the first part of the Acts I and III obey a different logic: although they also do not entail any subjective transformation of the narrator itself—Gurnemanz is rather a kind of gray Communist functionary reporting on the past struggles...—they do each time transform their addressee, Parsifal.

⁶² Wagner, *Parsifal*, p. 60.

tion, de-Semitize him”? But what if we read this line more literally, as echoing the other “tautological” statement from the finale, “the wound can be healed only by the spear which smote it (*die Wunde schließt der Speer nur, der sie schlug*)”?⁶³ Is this not the key paradox of every revolutionary process, in the course of which not only is violence needed to overcome the existing violence, but the revolution itself, in order to stabilize itself into a New Order, has to eat its own children? Wagner a proto-Fascist? Why not leave behind this search for the ‘proto-Fascist’ elements in Wagner and, rather, in a violent gesture of appropriation, re-inscribe *Parsifal* in the tradition of radical revolutionary parties?

⁶³ Ibid., p. 59.

II. THE PORTRAIT OF A RUSSIAN GAY GENTLEMAN

The Mystery of the Superfluous Act Two

For a European classical music elitist educated in the tradition of Adorno, the name ‘Tchaikovsky’ cannot but give rise to the Joseph Goebbels-reaction of drawing a gun: Tchaikovsky represents the lowest kitsch, comparable only to Sibelius or Rachmaninoff. However, as Daniel Gregory Mason succinctly put it, Tchaikovsky “has the merits of his defects”:¹ not only was he aware of his limitations and weakpoints, his (few) truly great moments paradoxically arose *from* these defects. He admitted that he could “seldom sustain a whole movement at the height of its greatest passages”—a problem not only for him, but also for most Romantics up to Elgar. What Berlioz said about Mendelssohn fully holds for Elgar’s *Cello Concerto*: it starts well, but it is unable to sustain the creative tension all the way through. There are, however, exceptions, miraculous successes, like Tchaikovsky’s first true masterpiece, his *Francesca da Rimini* symphonic poem (1876): in its middle (11 minutes into it), a passage sounding very 20th century, almost like a Bernard Herrmann score for Hitchcock, suddenly occurs, a kind of flight into the future; then the standard Romanticism gradually

¹ Daniel Gregory Mason, “Life as a Composer,” *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. See online: <http://www.oocities.org/Vienna/5648/Composer.htm> (accessed 22/1/2015).

returns. It is as if Tchaikovsky provides here an example of what Walter Benjamin understood as a message coming from the future, of something for which the time when it was written lacked the proper means to hear and understand it properly. (This is how modernism works: what were originally fragments of an organic Whole get autonomized—in painting, the whole of late Miró can be traced back to the details of his early figurative paintings.) No wonder that this is the music used for the ballet sequence at the end of Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain*. This is what is worth looking for in Tchaikovsky—signs from the future, miracles of modernity in the midst of Romantic kitsch.

In *Francesca*, Tchaikovsky presents a symphonic interpretation of the tragic tale from the fifth canto of Dante's *Inferno*: Dante the narrator meets the shade of Francesca da Rimini, a noblewoman who fell in love with the brother of her ugly husband; after the lovers were discovered and killed in revenge by the husband, they were condemned to *Hell* for their adulterous passions. In their damnation, they are trapped in a violent storm but separated from each other, never to touch again, tormented most of all by the ineradicable memory of the joys and pleasures of the embraces they once shared. No wonder *Francesca* was written immediately prior to *Onegin*: the topic of lovers suffering eternal damnation in Hell as the punishment for their prohibited lust should be given all its weight—for Tchaikovsky, the fully consummated heterosexual passion *was* Hell. One can thus propose a precise hypothesis: what if, in *Onegin*, the book Tatyana is reading at the beginning of

Act I, depicting the suffering of lovers, the cause of her pale face, is none other than Dante's *Inferno*, more precisely, the story of Francesca da Rimini? "*The account of the torments suffered by these true lovers moves me; I'm so sorry for them, poor things! Oh, how they suffer, how they suffer!*"

The pale face of a woman finding pleasure in pain perfectly renders the predisposition which makes Tatyana ready to fall in love instantly, with tragic consequences that are the reverse of *Francesca*: in *Francesca*, catastrophe results from the fully consummated sexual love, while in *Onegin*, it results from the double missed encounter. The main topic of *Eugene Onegin* is, rather obviously, a missed sexual encounter: in Act I, she wants it and he doesn't; in Act III, he wants it and she doesn't. The symmetry of rejections is clear: in both cases, there is first a letter (from Tatyana to Onegin, from Onegin to Tatyana), then the rejection of the addressee. Onegin's rejection—I was not made for wedded bliss, marriage would be a torment for us, so learn to control your fancy and you will see that your love is just a fleeting passion—is *a lie in the guise of truth*: what he says is true, but he says the right thing for the wrong reason. Onegin is right to reject her letter—it is obvious from the words of the letter scene that Tatyana's love is sustained by fantasmatic recognition: Onegin is loved because he fits the frame of her fantasy which preexists her encounter with him; this accounts for Tatyana's paradoxical claim that the first time she saw him, she recognized him (as the One she was waiting for):

You appeared before me in my dreams;
as yet unseen, you were already dear,
your wondrous gaze filled me with longing,
your voice resounded in my heart
long ago... no, it was no dream!
As soon as you arrived, I recognized you,
I almost swooned, began to blaze with passion,
and to myself I said: 'Tis he!²

What this means is that Tatyana's love for Onegin in Act I is false; only at the end does Tatyana truly love Onegin—but it is his love which is now false. When Onegin declares his love to her in Act III, Tatyana asks the right question: why now? What is in me more than myself now? The answer is: now she is a lady, married to an older powerful hero. One should not ascribe to Onegin base motifs for this (as Tatyana herself does at first)—what makes her truly desirable is the obstacle itself, *her very inaccessibility*, her elevation to the status of a prohibited object. All of a sudden, we find ourselves in the universe of *courtly love* with its incestuous triangle: the hero desires the sublime lady who is the legal wife of an older man—we find this constellation from medieval romances like *Tristan and Isolde* to the American *film noir*. Onegin's desire is aroused by the chance to steal his wife from the paternal figure, to attain the unattainable. Donal Henahan sees Prince

² The following citations from *Eugene Onegin* are taken from the English libretto as included in the recording from Georg Solti and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden from 1974. The libretto is online accessible. See: <http://www.opera-guide.ch/opera.php?uilang=en&id=373> (accessed 22/7/2015).

Gremin's aria as an exemplary case of arias "in which an operatic character is painted so vividly and so fully that a complete person comes to life before our very ears";³ in each act of *Onegin*, we have one such aria—Tatyana's letter scene in Act I, Lensky's aria when he is waiting for Onegin at the duel place in Act II, and Gremin's aria in Act III:

Not surprisingly, he does not provide Onegin himself with a similar chance to reveal himself as a person of any dimension. The reason is perhaps too obvious to be entirely true. Because of his homosexuality, Tchaikovsky made a disastrous marriage and all but ruined his own life and the life of his bewildered bride. In making Onegin a shallow, self-centered cad he may have felt he was wreaking vengeance on himself.⁴

Gremin's aria is the last of the three *eros energumenos*, cases of a person "possessed (energized) by eros" and exploding in a display of erotic passion, each of which, obviously the "big hit" of the Act, deserves a brief comment. First, there is Tatyana's love letter scene. At the very beginning of *Onegin*, in the brief orchestral prelude: the short melodic motif ("Tatyana's theme") is not properly developed, but merely repeated in different

³ See Donal Henahan, "Music View; Am [sic] Operatic Character Can Come 'To Life in a Single Aria," *The New York Times*, October 14, 1984. See online: <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/14/arts/music-view-am-operatic-character-can-come-to-life-in-a-single-aria.html> (accessed 22/1/2015).

⁴ Ibid.

modes, fully retaining its isolated character of a melodic fragment, not even a full melodic line. There is a genuine melancholic character in such a repetition which registers and displays the underlying impotence, the failure of proper development. It is significant that this theme gets properly developed into a kind of organic texture only in the letter scene, in this utopian explosion of Tatyana's desire—a kind of Tchaikovsky equivalent to the ballad of Senta in *The Flying Dutchman* (another opera which grew out of this central song, and which is also about the heroine immediately recognizing the hero since the Dutchman also, “as yet unseen, he was were already dear to her”). No wonder that Onegin withdraws from Tatyana's embarrassingly open display of erotic passion. There is a dimension of action in Tatyana's effectively sending her letter to Onegin: she exposes herself in all her vulnerability and risks being hurt if Onegin rejects her or if he uses her for a quick affair. This act stands in contrast to the standard melodramatic gesture of a woman who writes a letter to her lover (containing some sensitive and painful message), but then, in the midst of writing it, throws it away and goes herself to her lover, offering herself, the lure of herself, to obfuscate the message of the undelivered letter. Tatyana sends the letter instead of offering herself directly, thus avoiding the catastrophe of a scandal—or does she?

Gremin's aria shares with the letter scene this dimension of the embarrassing, almost indecent, public display of passion: “Onegin, I do not know how to disguise the fact: I love Tatyana mindlessly.” One should note

here the irony: Tatyana doesn't love Gremin—but does he know this? If yes, is then his love for her a true love? Is not their marriage part of the very superficial/formal society he claims to despise? Significantly, prior to this aria, Onegin does not express any love for Tatyana (he even doesn't recognize her)—it is as if, in a kind of explosion of mimetic desire, he identifies with Gremin's view of Tatyana (they share the same disgust at fashionable society). Tatyana is thus fully justified in rejecting him, and the opera ends with a quadruple *no*—not Tatyana's *no* to Onegin, but his rejection of her *no*:

TATYANA

Deep in my heart his desperate appeal
strikes an answering chord,
but having stifled the sinful flame,
honor's severe and sacred duty
will triumph over the passion!
I leave you!

ONEGIN

No! No! No! No!

Onegin here gets back his own message to Tatyana (in Act I) in its true (inverted) form: after telling her to control her emotions, now he hears from her that *he* should stifle the sinful flame. This Tatyana's *no* is not as strong as the *no* of the feminine heroines in modern European novel from *La Princesse de Clèves* to *The Portrait of a Lady*: it remains at the level of a simple and direct conflict between social duties and obligations

and private passion, failing to indicate that her *no* is internal to their love relationship, an expression of its immanent logic. It proceeds in two steps: first, she suspects that Onegin is merely fascinated by her new status of a high society lady—an affair with her would prop his reputation as a seducer; then, convinced of his sincere true love, she gives the reason for her rejection—she prefers duty to sinful passion. What is missing is the situation of *Clèves* and *Portrait*, where the woman rejects the lover precisely when, finally, there are no obstacles, when they could start living together without infringing on public morals. To bring *Onegin* to this level, one can imagine a small change in the content of Act III which would even better motivate the otherwise strange outburst of *eros energumenos* in Prince Gremin: Gremin is secretly aware that Tatyana still loves Onegin, and, furthermore, he knows he will soon die—so he makes the public confession to Onegin in order to make the lovers feel guilty and spoil the chances of their reunion after his death. Then, one can imagine a melodramatic twist: immediately after his outburst, Gremin retires to his private quarters and dies—it is at *this* moment, when there are no legal or ethical obstacles to their union, that Onegin approaches Tatyana and that she rejects him.

It is for this reason that the finale of the story does not have the full tragic weight it could and should have had—the finale of Act II is simply more shattering. We should combine this fact with another strange feature of Tchaikovsky's *Onegin*: its basic story, the missed encounter of the two lovers, would have worked much

better if Act II were simply left out.⁵ Let us then indulge in a thought experiment and imagine the exact same opera as a two-act piece, comprised of Acts I and III of the existing opera:

(i) Mme. Larina, a landed proprietress and the mother of Tatyana and Olga, is visited at her country estate by Lensky, a neighboring proprietor, who is engaged to Olga. He brings with him his friend Eugene Onegin. Tatyana, an ingenuous-minded girl of romantic disposition, sees in Eugene the hero of her girlish dreams and falls in love with him. In a letter to Eugene she confesses her love, and arranges a meeting. Eugene, a disappointed, misanthropic person, keeps the appointment, but returns the girl's letter and advises her to restrain her feelings.

(2a) Some years elapse. Tatyana is now a high society lady in St. Petersburg, the wife of Prince Gremin, an older war hero. When Onegin returns from travel abroad, he meets Tatyana at a large reception, falls deeply in love with her, and pleads with her to fly with him. Tatyana, although admitting her love for

⁵ In Wagner also, the second act is the pivotal point. While all the 'big hits' of *Walküre* are in Acts I and III, the key shift of the entire *Ring*—Wotan's submission to Fricka—takes place in Act II, which (like *Onegin*, incidentally) ends with Wotan causing the death of his beloved son Siegmund, a much more shattering event than his farewell from Brünnhilde in Act III. Apropos *Lohengrin*, one can imagine the same mental experiment as we did with *Onegin*: the opera reduced to only Acts I and III would make perfect sense, without depriving us of any 'big hits'—just depriving us of the musically most progressive and psychologically most penetrating part of the opera.

him, rejects him, and Onegin remains alone and desperate.

The story makes perfect sense, the two acts are fully symmetric, presenting us with a double failed encounter. The only element which sticks out as superfluous is the other couple (Lensky and Olga). Thus one can imagine an even leaner storyline, Act I without this additional couple:

(1a) Mme. Larina, a landed proprietress and the mother of Tatyana, is visited at her country estate by Eugene Onegin, a neighboring proprietor. Tatyana, an ingenuous-minded girl of romantic disposition, sees in Eugene the hero of her girlish dreams and falls in love with him. In a letter to Eugene she confesses her love, and appoints a meeting. Eugene, a disappointed, misanthropic person, keeps the appointment, but returns the girl's letter and advises her to restrain her feelings.

Act II is the key to the opera's mysterious imbalance. Why, then, the additional couple and the tragedy with Lensky? The only explanation is the underlying presence of another, homosexual, erotic link: Onegin-Lensky. To account for this other link, one can imagine another alternate version of the same opera—this time with only Acts I and II:

(1) Mme. Larina, a landed proprietress and the mother of Tatyana and Olga, is visited at her country

estate by Lensky, a neighboring proprietor, who is engaged to Olga. He brings with him his friend Eugene Onegin. Tatyana, an ingenuous-minded girl of romantic disposition, sees in Eugene the hero of her girlish dreams and falls in love with him. In a letter to Eugene she confesses her love, and appoints a meeting. Eugene, a disappointed, misanthropic person, keeps the appointment, but returns the girl's letter and advises her to restrain her feelings.

(2b) Then comes Tatyana's birthday and a dance given in its honor by Mme. Larina. Eugene Onegin is present, and capriciously aggravates his friend Lensky by his attentions to the latter's fiancée, Olga, a heartless flirt. Maddened jealousy leads to a duel, and Onegin shoots Lensky.

Although a bit more eccentric, this story also make sense: Onegin rejects Tatyana on behalf of his passion for Lensky, but is then disappointed and jealous when he sees that Lensky persists in his love for Olga, refusing to do his part of the love deal, so he provokes a duel... a fully consistent tragic process: first one sacrifices the love object for a higher (homosexual) goal; then, one loses also the higher object and remains alone.—How are we to bring the two stories together? Our hypothesis is that there is no proper organic unity in *Onegin*: the story of the opera as we have it is a (not fully consistent) composite of two discrete stories. There are then two possibilities for unity:

(a) One can stage Act III as Onegin's fantasy which takes place at the end of Act II, when he stands alone near Lensky's body—a kind of fantasmatic “flight into the future” to punish himself for his act. It would thus be clear that the tragic finale of Act III is a fake, a lure to obliterate the true tragedy of the end of Act II.

(b) One can also make the storyline a little bit more consistent by combining and changing the order of Acts II and III:

(2b) Some years elapse. Tatyana is now a high society lady in St. Petersburg, the wife of Prince Gremin, an older war hero. Returning from travel abroad, Onegin meets Tatyana at a large ball, where Lensky and Olga are also present. This time, Onegin falls deeply in love with her. Following her to a small room where she takes a respite, he pleads with her to fly with him. Tatyana, although admitting her love for him, rejects him. Embittered by the rejection, Onegin returns to the dance hall where the view of the happy Lensky dancing with Olga only deepens his crisis; in order to hurt Tatyana (who, as he knows, still loves him), he starts to flirt with Olga. This causes an outbreak of wild jealousy in Lensky, who challenges Onegin to a duel. Next morning, they meet and Onegin shoots Lensky.

In our politically correct times, it is fashionable to discern homosexuality in the musical texture of some classic composers and thereby redeem them—there are, for example, totally unconvincing and ridiculous

readings of Schubert: for instance, he must have been gay, because his music is non-aggressive, penetrative, phallic, full of soft passages. In the case of *Onegin*, however, we stand on firmer ground. In the fall of 1876 Tchaikovsky informed his closest family members of his intention to marry—a typical hysterical *passage à l'acte*, an act of ethical betrayal, of compromising one's desire, that is, a desperate attempt to thwart his homosexuality. Half a year later, the eagerly awaited 'answer of the Real' came—Antonina Milyukova, his piano student a couple of years before, wrote to him, declaring that she had been in love with him ever since. Tchaikovsky tactfully but firmly rejected her, and, at this precise moment, he threw himself into composing *Onegin* (starting with Tatyana's letter to Onegin—he was already for some time playing with the idea of making a song out of this letter). As he later admitted, from this moment onwards, fact and fiction became inextricably entangled: he identified with Tatyana's love for Onegin and was outraged at Onegin's moralistic rejection, perceiving it as equal to his own rejection of Antonina. Consequently, he contacted Antonina again, telling her bluntly that he didn't love her, but was ready to marry her; he then left Antonina to make all the wedding preparations, while he escaped Moscow to a friend's country estate, where he composed two thirds of the opera in five weeks. What followed is well-known: the honeymoon was a nightmare, the des-

perate Tchaikovsky attempted suicide and then quickly left his wife for a long tour of Western Europe.⁶

The point is not to use Tchaikovsky's real-life trauma as a 'key' for understanding his opera, but, on the contrary, to refer to *Onegin* as a symbolic point of reference which co-determined his (re)actions in the real-life crisis: he clearly perceived his situation after receiving a letter from Antonina through the frame of the *Onegin* story—the 'real' Tchaikovsky wrote to Antonina again, accepting her proposal, in order not to repeat Onegin's mistake. In real life, the woman's love letter did (finally) reach its destination, while in the fiction, it did not make it. The key feature to remember here is that, although Tchaikovsky fully sympathized with Tatyana's plight, he identified with Onegin, seeing his rejection of Antonina's offer as parallel to Onegin's rejection of Tatyana's offer—does this not imply that he also transposed into Onegin his own reason for rejecting Antonina's letter (i.e., homosexuality)?

Numerous details of the libretto and the score confirm that Onegin rejects Tatyana because he is more concerned with flirting with Lensky and making him jealous than with anything to do with Olga or Tatyana. The love triangle that leads to the duel is Lensky, Olga and Onegin, but not in the sense of the two men competing for Olga—it is rather Olga and Onegin who compete for Lensky, that is, Onegin wants Lensky to choose *him* and not Olga, as Onegin already did when he re-

⁶ See David Brown, "Eugene Onegin," notes to the film version of the opera (video recording: London, publisher number: Decca 071 124-9, directed by Petr Weigl, conducted by Georg Solti).

jected Tatyana. The reason Onegin decides to provoke Lensky by flirting with Olga in Act Two is not the ridiculous one given in the libretto (he is angry at Lensky who dragged him to a provincial ball), but Lensky's display of love for Olga—Onegin's message is: "I dropped Tatyana for you, and you do not want to drop Olga!"

This brings us to the second—and crucial—display of *eros energumenos*: Lensky's aria which precedes the duel scene in Act Two. Here, Lensky finally returns love, although it is already too late: the sequence of texts selected from Pushkin's original and arranged for this scene indicates that Lensky has Onegin in mind when he sings "zhelannyj drug, pridi, ya tvoy suprug" ("desired comrade, come, I am your husband"—in Russian, "drug" is masculine!). The very rhyme in Russian *drug-suprug* (desired comrade-husband) puts Onegin, not Lensky, in the position of husband. (Opera composers often resort to such rhymes to signal a proximity which belies the official opposition. Recall the beginning of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, where Leporello first vehemently protests and wants no longer to be a servant; however, the moment he hears some rustling sounds in the background, his first thought is not to be noticed—a natural reaction of a servant, the reversal signaled by a rhyme: "*Io non voglio più servir—Non mi voglio far' sentir.*") In Pushkin's verse novel, Lensky writes these words in a letter that is sent privately to Olga, but the dramatic sequence in the opera produces a totally different effect, as if answering this appeal, Onegin appears immediately after these words have been sung:

Early in the morning the dawn-light gleams
and the day begins to brighten,
while I, perhaps, will enter
the mysterious shadow of the grave!
And the memory of a young poet
will be engulfed by Lethe's sluggish stream.
The world will forget me; but you,
You!... Olga...

Say,
will you come, maid of beauty,
to shed a tear on the untimely urn
and think: he loved me!
To me alone he devoted
the sad dawn of his storm-tossed life!
Oh, Olga, I loved you,
to you alone I devoted
the sad dawn of my storm-tossed life!
Oh, Olga, I loved you!
My heart's beloved, my desired one,
come, oh come! My desired one,
come, I am your betrothed, come, come!
I wait for you, my desired one,
come, come; I am your betrothed!
Where, where, where have you gone,
golden days, golden days of my youth?

Zaretsky returns to Lensky.

ZARETSKY

Ah, here they are!

Remember the classic scene in the early detective stories, where Sherlock Holmes begins to disclose the secret to a gathered group: “And the murderer is...” At that very moment, in the middle of the sentence, a butler (or someone else) interrupts him, announcing the arrival of a new guest: “‘Lord Edgar,’ said the butler.” In the denouement, of course, we learn that there was a truth in this contingent overlapping: Lord Edgar effectively is the murderer.—Lensky’s aria was worth quoting *in extenso*. Four moments deserve a short comment here. First, as in Tatyana’s letter, we find *here also* Tatyana’s theme imbricated into the musical texture. Then, there is the fantasy of observing one’s own death—forgotten, only Olga remembers him. Crucial is the repetition of the same line in the third and then in the first person: “he loved me! To me alone he devoted the sad dawn of his storm-tossed life! Oh, Olga, I loved you, to you alone I devoted the sad dawn of my storm-tossed life!” Such identification with the Other’s point of view is narcissism at its purest. This fantasy is the screen whose function is to obfuscate the key feature of the situation *now*: Lensky’s love for Onegin. Note the *past* tense of the love declaration to Olga (as opposed to the *present* call to the beloved to come): *I loved* you (as in Don Giovanni, where Donna Anna consoles Don Ottavio: “You know how much I *loved* you!”—till I was overwhelmed by Don Giovanni’s brutal seduction...). The last lines (“Where have you gone, golden days of my youth?”) are nothing but a reflection of despair on the situation announced by the preceding lines, their message is: “my golden days have gone, I am now tossed around by the wild

passion for Onegin..." In the golden days which have gone, Lensky loved Olga; now, he is Onegin's betrothed. No wonder that the "Enemies!" duet, sung by Onegin and Lensky after Onegin's belated arrival and just before the duel, is set up as a canon, causing each one to repeat their lines almost tripping over each other, more like a love duet. (Furthermore, the theme of Lensky's Act I aria "Ya lyublyu vas" ("I love you"), addressed to Olga, is heard in the orchestra immediately after Onegin and Lensky's duet—significantly, *without* the notes on which the appositive name Olga is previously sung.) Onegin and Lensky sing the duet standing with their backs to each other, their attraction too hot to sustain a direct face-to-face confrontation:

Enemies! Is it long since the thirst
for blood drove us apart?
Is it so long since we shared everything,
our meals, our thoughts, our leisure,
as friends together? Now in anger,
like hereditary enemies,
we silently and cold-bloodedly
prepare to destroy each other.
Oh, should we not burst out laughing
before we stain our hands with blood,
and should we not part friends?
No! No! No! No!

Musically, this short duo is very strange: emotionally blank, disinvested, where one would expect an explosion of passionate despair, as if the libidinal invest-

ment was too hot to handle and had to be withdrawn, "repressed." Indeed, what we have here is the *end* (not, as in *Casablanca*, the beginning) of a beautiful friendship. There is a deep ambiguity of the final quadruple *no* (which foretells the quadruple No in Act III)—is it "no, we should stop the duel and part as friends" or "no, it is too late for that"? What if the multiple excessive *no* is the *no* to homosexual relationship—a *no* stronger than mere rejection, a *no* which represses out of view what is rejected and desired?

But is there also a *yes*, an affirmative dimension that should establish a counterbalance to this proliferation of *no*'s? As befits a Russian opera, this positive dimension is provided by the common people embodied in the Chorus (servants and farmers) in the background. This Chorus is not the embodiment of the Russian province, but rather the background screen which obfuscates the spirit of the province: if one wants to feel all the pressure of provincial life, one should imagine the Act I scenes *without* the Chorus—it is only in this way that the provincial despair would become palpable. However, if we take a closer look, we see signs that the Chorus does not represent the ideological spectacle of the naive unspoiled wisdom of ordinary people. The innocent song is the one the peasants returning from work sing to amuse their mistress Larina; however, prior to that, their song is a complaint about how tired they are of working hard:

PEASANT LEADER

My white hands ache from working.

PEASANTS

... Ache from working.
My ardent heart aches from caring.
I don't know what to do,
how to forget my sweetheart.
My swift little feet ...

The peasant band enters, the leaders bearing a decorated sheaf.

Greetings, your ladyship,
greetings, benefactress!
We come before your Grace
bearing the decorated sheaf!
The harvest is all gathered in!

LARINA

So, that's excellent. Now make merry!
I'm pleased to see you all.
Sing us something jolly!

PEASANTS

If that's what you'd like, little mother!
Come, let's entertain the lady.
Now, girls, stand in a ring!
Come along now, all get ready!

The tired peasants thus play happy innocents singing a song to satisfy their mistress ("If that's what you'd like, little mother! Come, let's entertain the lady."). (Recall the same duality at the very beginning of *Boris Go-*

dunov: first, the police officer with a whip brutally orders the gathered crowd to sing an entreaty to Boris to accept the crown (“*Well then, what’s wrong with you! Have you turned to stone! Quick then, down on your knees!*”). Then only the crowd starts to play their proper ‘Russian’ role, asking their “father” Boris not to leave them as orphans and begging him “with tears, with bitter tears” to accept the crown.) In a 1928 Moscow production of *Onegin*, this scene of the grateful serfs laying their harvest at the feet of a landowner was left out, as this was considered “insulting to the Workers’ and Peasants’ Government”—but they couldn’t have been more wrong! (The same goes for the later song of the peasant girls who are picking berries: there is nothing idyllic about it, they are forced to sing so that they cannot put the picked berries into their mouths.)

Sergei Prokofiev wrote *Onegin* as “scenic music” (op. 71) in 1936, when the Soviet Union was preparing for a major celebration the following year to mark the centenary of the death of Pushkin; the performance was cancelled at the last moment. In his ‘Soviet’ version, Prokofiev addresses precisely these ‘background’ issues, so, perhaps, the ideal staging of Tchaikovsky’s *Onegin* would have been to perform it as an operatic ‘double bill,’ followed by Prokofiev’s version.

III. THE YOUNG WOMAN AND A RIVER

Janáček's *Katja Kabanova* is based on *The Storm*, the most popular play of Alexander Nikolayevich Ostrovsky (1823–1886), a Russian writer who was also a passionate social reformer, deeply concerned about the greed, superstition, and narrow-mindedness of the Russian society of his day.¹ The characters at the center of his plays are exponents of what the Russians call *samodurstvo*: narrow-minded, blinkered, stubborn, unshakable, and immovable self-righteousness which manifests itself in closed minds and domestic tyranny. The tragic irony and point of *The Storm* is that Katerina (Katja) Kabanova, its heroine who rebels against *samodurstvo*, is already too deeply indoctrinated with the poison against which she rebels: so terribly strong and so deeply ingrained is the sense of sin, the superstition that pervades that narrow society, that Katerina cannot escape their consequences. During a thunderstorm when the townspeople have to seek shelter in a ruined church covered in ancient frescoes of the Torments of hell, she hears the wrath of the heavens in the thunder and lightning, and breaks down and confesses her transgression; and from the ruin of her life which this self-accusation causes there is only one escape for her: suicide. To 19th century Europeans, Katerina thus could not but seem a weak and passive victim, but to Russians,

¹ Incidentally, Janáček was not the first to put *The Storm* into music: none other than Tchaikovsky wrote the overture "Storm" (Op. 76).

in whom passivity and fatalism was ingrained from generations of serfdom, she was a symbol of revolt, since her actions explode the horizon of those bound by tradition. For example, tradition insisted that a wife wail loudly when her husband went away as proof of her devotion: embracing a husband in public and leaving the house to meet another man were unbelievable breeches of proper behavior.

So what does Janáček do with this story? Basically, the whole aspect of social rebellion, of the Enlightenment fight against religious prejudices, disappears: Janáček's Katja is a victim of fate in the guise of a blind uncontrollable passion—why? One should take into account the shift in historical situation: Janáček wrote his opera in the early 20th century when peasant *samo-durstvo* was no longer a direct reality to be fought but a thing of the (nostalgic) past, a closed universe of passions and their repression no longer here in modern industrialized society. Does this make him an ideological mystifier, somebody presenting a historically determined oppression as eternal human fate? The comparison with another Katarina in another 20th century opera based on a similar Russian narrative—Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*—seems to confirm this conclusion: Shostakovich's Katerina Izmailova rebels, she kills her husband and father-in-law, in contrast to Janáček's Katerina Kabanova who is only able to turn her violence against herself.

Lady Macbeth is based on the famous horror story by another 19th century Russian writer, Nikolai Leskov, about a real-life case of Katerina Izmailova, a mer-

chant's wife in the middle of the great Russian nowhere, who rebels against her patriarchal surroundings by murdering her husband, her father-in-law, and her husband's saintly nephew. She and her lover, Sergei, are discovered in the act of killing the little boy and sentenced to exile in Siberia. On the way there, Sergei gets entangled with another younger woman-prisoner, whom Katerina murders by jumping with her into a freezing river in which both of them drown. Shostakovich turned this creepy tale into a Soviet morality play: the objective conditions under which Katerina was forced to live justify her acts of violence which are not crimes but acts of feminist liberation. (Of course, in such a reinterpretation, the third murder had to be left out.) In order to achieve this reinterpretation, Shostakovich combined Leskov's Katerina with Ostrovsky's Katerina, offering as the motivation of her acts libidinal awakening:

A whole scene from Ostrovsky's play (Katerina's oath of fidelity) is inserted into the libretto to make the point; and Shostakovich referred to his heroine with the same famous epithet—"a ray of light in the Dark Kingdom"—by which a 19th-century radical writer had honored Ostrovsky's gentle heroine 60 years before. [...] Shostakovich [...] described the difference between Ostrovsky's meek heroine and their rampageous one as that between the mild protests of a czarist writer and the triumphant achievements of Socialist Realism. Their Katerina, they proudly

announced, was no mere ray of light but the full radiance of the Marxist sun.²

Leskov's approach to his story is signaled by its first sentence: "Certain characters are sometimes found in our regions whom we cannot remember without shuddering, however many years may have passed since the day we met them." Following the murder of her father-in-law, his Katerina is swept into a whirlpool of almost inevitable crimes which will take her to her death: everything starts with a blunder, a first crime, which is why the motto at the beginning of Leskov's story is a popular saying: "Think twice before you take the first step!" Hence it is in fact a moral, exemplary tale. In the opera, this tone of a true-to-life, horrifying, moralizing chronicle is replaced by the viewpoint of the main character herself, who is offered as the figure of our identification. Katarina Izmailova is a kind of Madame Bovary gone wild, reacting to her cramped condition in an unsatisfying marriage with a wild explosion of murderous violence, in the long tradition that reaches from the naturalism of Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* to the American *film noir* (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*). Within this tradition, misogyny is inextricably linked to the feminist potential: it is the desperate patriarchal condition that drives a wife to an outburst of power in the form of violence.

² Richard Taruskin, "A Martyred Opera Reflects Its Abominable Time," *The New York Times*, November 6, 1994.

One of the most scandalous aspects of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth* is the graphic orchestral depiction of the first violently passionate sexual exchange between Katarina and Sergei in Act III: the 'external' mickey-mousing of the gasps and thrusts of the act of copulation, inclusive of the explicit trombone slides providing the half-comic rendering of the post-orgasmic reprieve. Listening to the orchestral depiction of the sexual act in *Lady Macbeth*, one is almost tempted to agree with Comrade Stalin who, after furiously leaving the Bolshoi theater after this very scene, in his infinite wisdom ordered the anonymous article "Muddle Instead of Music" to be published in January 28, 1936, issue of *Pravda*, in which it says: "The music quacks, hoots, pants, and gasps in order to express the love scenes as naturally as possible"—Prokofiev himself ironically designated Shostakovich's *Macbeth* music as the next step in the progress from monophony to polyphony—"pornophony." However, Shostakovich's redemption of Katerina's two murders as the justified acts of the victim of patriarchal oppression is more ominous than it may appear: the price for this justification, the only way to make the murders palpable, is the derogation, dehumanization even, of the victims (her husband's father is portrayed as an old lecherous ruffian, while the son is an impotent weakling without any clear characterization, avoided since it could give rise to sympathy for him in the murder scene). Furthermore, Taruskin was right to emphasize the historical context of the opera: the years of the ruthless terror against the *kulaks*. Are the murdered father and son

not two exemplary *kulaks*? In the first two years of the opera's triumphant performance, before Stalin's ban, was it possible for the public not to perceive how its violent content echoes the violence of *dekulakization*? The opera's official condemnation should thus not blind us to the fact that it is a deeply disturbing Stalinist work which legitimizes the ongoing murderous anti-*kulak* campaign. Taruskin's conclusion is thus that *Lady Macbeth* is "a profoundly inhumane work of art": "if ever an opera deserved to be banned it was this one, and matters are not changed by the fact that its actual ban was for wrong and hateful reasons."³

We can thus establish a matrix of four positions with regard to how Janáček and Shostakovich relate to their literary models: Shostakovich transforms Leskov's naturalistic-moralistic depiction of a moral monster into a story of aggressive feminine rebellion; Janáček transforms Ostrovsky's sympathetic story of the victim of religious superstition and social oppression into a drama of elementary passions. One of the ways to further elaborate the comparison between Janáček and Shostakovich is with regard to the sexual act, the consummation of the affair, which takes place in the middle of both operas: Shostakovich displays it fully on stage, while in Janáček, it occurs behind the stage, in the *off* space. Does this feature signal the 'progress' of Shostakovich over Janáček's prudish restraint, which is also reflected in the opposite resolution of Katarina's

³ Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1997, p. 509.

predicament: in Janáček, Katarina breaks down, confesses her act and kills herself, while Shostakovich's Katerina violently rebels against her oppressors—again, is this 'progress' or not? And what about the third, modern secular, resolution of the same tension, with Katarina simply leaving her husband and his family, not to mention the comic version (Katarina going on cheating her husband)—would this still be the stuff of opera?

Let us return to the Act II of *Kabanova*: in it, the couple of Katarina and her lover Boris is presented as one in a series, in clear contrast to two other couples: the failed relationship of Katja and Boris is situated between two well-functioning couples, the 'normal' couple of Varvara and Kudriash, two young people whose relationship is a simple joyful love affair, and who, at the end, decide to leave for Moscow in order to lead a free life; the 'pathological' couple of Kabanikha and Dikoi: outwardly respectful moral monsters who practice cruelty through 'good manners,' and whose relationship is based on the sadomasochistic game of finding satisfaction in self-humiliation and torturing the other. The paradox of Katja is that, as to her subjective attitude, she is the very opposite of an easy flirtatious woman: she is a perfect wife, religious, humble, loving, serving. *This is why* Kabanikha, her mother-in-law, hates her, as it were, *ontologically*, striving to destroy her in her very being. Kabanikha cannot tolerate true affection, the overlapping of inner affects and external form—for her, there must be a gap between the two, the form *must* be 'hypocritical.' So when, at the beginning

of Act II, Kabanikha criticizes Katja for not making a display of grief over her husband's absence, she is not reproaching her for her insincerity, but, precisely, for her lack of insincerity, for failing to perform a hypocritical ritual of grief.

When Kabanikha demands from Katarina to *fake* the ritual of grief, she may seem to rely on the point at which Alcoholics Anonymous meet Pascal: "Fake it until you make it." However, this causality of the habit is more complex than it may appear: far from offering an explanation of how beliefs emerge, it itself calls for an explanation. The first thing to specify is that Pascal's "Kneel down and you will believe!" has to be understood as involving a kind of self-referential causality: "Kneel down and you will believe *that you knelt down because you believed!*" The second thing is that, in the 'normal' cynical functioning of ideology, belief is displaced onto another, onto a 'subject supposed to believe,' so that the true logic is: "Kneel down and you will thereby *make someone else believe!*" One has to take this literally and even risk a kind of inversion of Pascal's formula: "You believe too much, too directly? You find your belief too oppressing in its raw immediacy? Then kneel down, act as if you believe, and *you will get rid of your belief*—you will no longer have to believe yourself, your belief will already ex-sist objectified in your act of praying!" That is to say, what if one kneels down and prays not so much to regain one's own belief but, to the contrary, to *get rid* of one's belief, of its overproximity, in order to acquire the minimal distance required for breathing space with respect to it? To be-

lieve—to believe ‘directly,’ without the externalizing mediation of a ritual—is a heavy, oppressing, traumatic burden, which, through the exertion of ritual, one has the chance of transferring onto an Other...

Niels Bohr, who gave the right answer to Einstein’s “God doesn’t play dice” (“Don’t tell God what to do!”), also provided the perfect example of how such a fetishist disavowal of belief works in ideology: seeing a horseshoe on his door, a surprised visitor said that he didn’t believe in the superstition that it brings luck, to which Bohr snapped back: “I also do not believe in it; I have it there because I was told that it works also if one does not believe in it!” What this paradox makes clear is how a belief is a reflexive attitude: it is never a case of simply believing—one has to believe in belief itself. Which is why Kierkegaard was right to claim that we do not really believe (in Christ), we just believe to believe, and Bohr just confronts us with the logical negative of this reflexivity: one can also *not* believe one’s beliefs—which, perhaps, is the only way to sustain our beliefs. In a perverse way, Kabanikha thus *does* have a point.

Both *Katja Kabanova* and *Jenufa*, Janáček’s other masterpiece, are set in a matriarchal universe which turns out to be no less oppressive than the patriarchal one; however, while, in *Katja*, matriarchy is presented as malevolent, as the reign of perverted and hypocritical Evil, in *Jenufa* it is a benevolent force: Sacristia, Jenufa’s mother-in-law, sacrifices herself for Jenufa, killing her newborn son in order to make possible her marriage—in *Jenufa*, the confession is not Jenufa’s, but Sacristia’s. It was already Max Brod, together with none

other than Kafka—Janáček's personal friend and admirer—who noticed this key common feature of *Jenufa* and *Katja*: the public confession.⁴ However, this shared feature only makes more palpable the contrast between the two cases: in *Jenufa*, the crime is truly a crime, but it is justified as an act of love that effectively saves Jenufa (by getting rid of the unwanted child, Jenufa can marry and lead a normal life), and the confession itself is also done out of love (to save Jenufa, who is suspected of killing her child), while in *Katja*, the crime (love affair) is not truly a crime at all, and its public confession is 'irrational'—far from saving the heroine, it brings about her destruction.

It is within such a pre-modern matriarchal universe that natural forces (the river Volga and the storm) can play a role that is much more than that of a metaphor for human passions. The river is the peaceful all-embracing Substance, the Great Mother which pursues its path indifferent to human strivings and adventures, while the storm stands for its opposite, the moment of revengeful rage and violent outbursts against our human efforts. This natural force is what Jacques Lacan called the "big Other," the substantial Real, the compass of our entire existence, that which "always returns to its place" and thus provides the basic coordinates of our lives—and as befits a matriarchal agricultural society, the rhythm of life is structured by the reference to natural cycles (seasons, day and night). With mod-

⁴ Max Brod, "Katia Kabanova," in: Leoš Janáček, *Katia Kabanova. L'Avant-scène opéra*, n° 114, Paris: Editions Premières loges 1988, p. 5.

ern patriarchal industrial society, this reliable big Other disappears, as is exemplified by the use of electricity which abolishes night with its impenetrable depth—the paradox is that at the very moment when the real night disappears the core of the modern subject becomes the “Night of the World”. For the hysterical heroine of Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*, there is no night, no natural compass that would provide a point of orientation to her life.

Recall Paul Robeson’s rewriting of his legendary “Ol’ Man River” as a model of simple and efficient critico-ideological intervention. In the original version from the Hollywood musical *Showboat* (1936), the river (Mississippi) is presented as the embodiment of the enigmatic and indifferent Fate, an old wise man who “must know somethin’, but don’t say nothin’,” and just keeps rolling, retaining its silent wisdom. In the new version—now available in, among other recordings, the recording of his notorious Moscow concert in 1949 (*Russian Revelation*, RV 70004) with a brief spoken introduction by Robeson himself in perfect Russian—the river is no longer the bearer of an anonymous, unfathomable collective wisdom, but, rather, the bearer of collective destiny, of the stupid, passive tolerance for meaningless suffering. This transition of the status of the big Other from wisdom to stupidity is crucial. Here are the final lines of the original song: “You gets a little drunk, / an’ you land in jail. / But I gets weary, / and sick of tryin’, / I’m tired of livin’, / and scared of dyin’. / But ol’ man river, / he just keeps rollin’ along.” And here is the changed version: “You show a little grit, / an’ you

lands in jail. / But I keeps laughin', / instead of cryin', / I must keep fightin', / until I'm dyin'. / And ol' man river, / he'll just keeps rollin' along." What the change of words achieves is not the simple passage from passive acceptance of fate to optimistic, active engagement and struggle, for recall that the last line of the new version remains the same, "And ol' man river, / he'll just keeps rollin' along." In other words, blind Fate remains but is deprived of its aura of unfathomable Wisdom, reduced not simply to historical contingency but to the inherent stupidity of the ideological big Other. This is what does not yet happen in *Katja Kabanova*, this reduction of the 'big Other' to a stupid meaningless mechanism.

However, the question still remains: *Why* does the storm shock Katja so strongly that it makes her publicly confess her affair and then to kill herself by way of rejoining the river, the all-encompassing maternal Substance? The place where the storm strikes and brings Katja to confess her act is changed in Janáček's opera: in Ostrovsky's story, it is a ruined church, and Katja is terrified when lightning lights the images of sinners suffering in hell, while in Janáček, it is simply "the vaultings of an old decrepit building," with no religious connotation which would make Katja's breakdown dependent on 'religious oppression.' So why does Katja confess and then kill herself? It is not just 'internalized religious morality' which prevents her from liberating herself; it is rather that, after consummating her affair, she

realizes that she cannot remain locked in a loveless marriage having once experienced true happiness. [...] Katya's suicide, then, is both an acceptance of defeat and a liberation. [...] While there is sadness in death, for Katya the real tragedy would have been to continue living.⁵

Is this not a situation similar to that at the end of Cameron's *Titanic* (another affair which ends up in drowning)? The true tragedy would have been for the couple to stay together.

The crucial element in the long aria of Katja's suicide is the repeated insistence on her blocked intention-to-signify, on her failure to put in words what she wants to say. First, she explains to Boris why she publicly confessed their affair: "I have not meant to harm you! I must have lost all my senses when I disclosed everything. It's not that! It's not that! I wanted to tell you something different!" A little bit later: "But no, no! Here I am talking about something else! And I wanted to tell you something else!" And again: "What it is I wished to say? There's such chaos in my head! I cannot remember anything." What does Katja find so difficult to put in words? Which deadlock bothers her? It concerns precisely the status of her confession: far from being caused by a religious feeling of guilt, of committing a mortal sin, her confession enacts a *utopian dream of publicly admitting her love*, a refusal to treat it as a

⁵ David Hurwitz, in accompanying notes to the Supraphon recording of *Kat'a Kabanova* (Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, Charles Mackerras).

secret affair. In this precise sense, Katja Kabanova is the true antipode to Wagner's *Tristan*.⁶ The myth of Tristan and Isolde was the first to give full expression to the axiom of courtly love: love is an act of radical transgression which suspends all socio-symbolic links and, as such, has to culminate in the ecstatic self-obliteration of death. (The corollary to this axiom is that love and marriage are incompatible: within the universe of socio-symbolic obligations, true love can only occur in the guise of adultery.) Why is this notion of the adulterous ecstatic self-obliteration which transgresses the bounds of marriage insufficient? There is something in marriage which gets lost when we locate marriage in the opposition between, on the one hand, its legal-economic role (guaranteeing inheritance, etc.), and its emotional psychic role, on the other hand: the symbolic act of publicly declaring the mutual unconditional attachment on the two persons involved. This act should *not* be reduced to the expression of one's emotions, since in a way it declares "We are committed to each other, *whatever* the fluctuations of our sentiments!" So when, say, Judith Butler insists, against the demand for the recognition of gay marriages, on the need to dissociate the form of marriage from the actual entitlements that are legally bestowed on the married subjects (healthcare, childcare, inheritance...), the problem is still what remains of this form itself, of the formal symbolic act of marriage which publicly

⁶ I rely in what follows on my reading of *Tristan* in Chapter 1 of Slavoj Žižek, *Der zweite Tod der Oper*, Berlin: Kadmos 2002.

proclaims the most intimate commitment. What if, in our postmodern world of ordained transgression, in which the marital commitment is perceived as ridiculously out of time, those who cling to it are the real subversives? One should recall again G. K. Chesterton's old perspicuous remark, in his "A Defense of Detective Stories," about how the detective story

keeps in some sense before the mind the fact that civilization itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellions. When the detective in a police romance stands alone, and somewhat fatuously fearless amid the knives and fists of a thief's kitchen, it does certainly serve to make us remember that it is the agent of social justice who is the original and poetic figure, while the burglars and footpads are merely placid old cosmic conservatives, happy in the immemorial respectability of apes and wolves. [The police romance] is based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies.⁷

What, then, if the same goes for marriage? What if, today, marriage is "the most dark and daring of all transgressions"? When, in 1916, Lenin's (at that point ex-) mistress Inessa Armand wrote him that even a fleeting passion was more poetic and cleaner than kisses without love between man and woman, he replied: "Kisses

⁷ Gilbert Keith Chesterton, "A Defense of Detective Stories," in: Howard Haycraft (ed.), *The Art of the Mystery Story*, New York: The Universal Library 1946, p. 6.

without love between vulgar spouses are filthy. I agree. These need to be contrasted... with what? It would seem: kisses with love. But you contrast ‘a fleeting (why a fleeting?) passion (why not love?)’—and it comes out logically as if kisses without love (fleeting) are contrasted to marital kisses without love... This is odd.” Lenin’s reply is usually dismissed as a proof of his personal small-bourgeois sexual constraint, sustained by his bitter memory of the past affair; however, there is more to it: the insight that the marital “kisses without love” and the extramarital “fleeting affair” are the two sides of the same coin—they both shirk from *combining* the Real of an unconditional passionate attachment with the form of symbolic proclamation. The implicit presupposition (or, rather, injunction) of the standard ideology of marriage is that, precisely, there should be no love in it: one gets married in order to cure oneself of the excessive passionate attachment, to replace it with the boring daily custom (and if one cannot resist the passion’s temptation, there are extra-marital affairs)—*Kabanikha*! Consequently, the ultimate subversion is to *nominate* the love union, to proclaim it publicly instead of concealing it. *Alyosha’s Love*, a Soviet film from the early sixties (the time of the so-called ‘Khrushchev’s thaw’), takes place in a group of geologists camping near a small town in the middle of the Siberian wilderness. The young Alyosha falls in love with a girl from the town; notwithstanding all the troubles that accompany his love (the girl is at first indifferent towards him; her ex-boyfriend’s companions give him a brutal beating; his own elder colleagues deride

him cruelly; etc.), Alyosha saves all his free time for long walks to the town, so that he can cast a quick and distant glance at the girl. At the end of the film, the girl gives way to the force of his love: she changes from the beloved to the loving one, takes the long walk herself and joins him in the camp. Alyosha's colleagues who work on the hill above the camp suspend their digging, stand up and silently follow the girl who approaches Alyosha's tent: it is over with the cynical distance and derision, the big Other itself is compelled to recognize its defeat, its fascination with the force of love—the sublime reversal occurs when the hero's passionate love is finally publicly acknowledged by his seemingly ignorant and cynical peers. Such a public proclamation is what marriage is ultimately about: a symbolic *commitment*, not just an expression of our (fluctuating) emotions—in the marriage ceremony, one makes a vow, one gives one's word. Which is why Romeo and Juliet are the very opposite of Tristan and Isolde: their aim is not to conduct a secret affair (they could have done this without disturbing the war between their respective families), but to get married, to proclaim immediately to the public their mutual commitment.

It was already Flaubert who made a crucial step in undermining the coordinates of the transgressive notion of love. Why was *Madame Bovary* dragged to court? Not, as it is usually claimed, because it portrays the irresistible charm of adultery and thus undermines the fundamentals of bourgeois sexual morality. *Madame Bovary* rather inverts the standard formula of the popular novel in which the adulterous lovers are at the end

punished for their transgressive enjoyment: in this kind of novel, of course, the final punishment (mortal illness, exclusion from society) only enhances the fatal attraction of the adulterous affair, at the same time allowing the reader to indulge in this attraction without penalty. What is so profoundly disturbing and depressing about *Madame Bovary* is that it takes away from us even this last refuge—it depicts adultery in all its misery, as a false liberation, an internal moment of the dull and grey bourgeois universe, rather than a moment of escape. This is the reason why *Madame Bovary* had to be brought to trial: it deprives the bourgeois individual of the last hope that an escape is possible from the constraints of meaningless everyday life. A passionate extramarital liaison not only poses no threat to conjugal love, it rather functions as a kind of inherent transgression which provides direct fantasmatic support to the conjugal link and thus participates in exactly what it purports to subvert. It is this very belief that, outside the constraints of marriage, in the adulterous transgression, we can really obtain ‘that,’ the full satisfaction, which is questioned by the hysterical attitude: hysteria involves the apprehension that the ‘real thing’ behind the mask of the social etiquette is itself void, a mere mirage. If there is a feature which serves as the clear index of modernism—from Strindberg to Kafka, from Munch to Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*—it is the emergence of the figure of the hysterical woman which stands for the radical disharmony in the relationship between the two sexes. Wagner doesn’t yet venture this step into hysteria: the problem with him is

not his hysteria (as Nietzsche thought), but, rather, that he is not hysterical enough. Although his dramas provide all possible variations of how 'love can go wrong,' all this takes place against the fantasmatic background of the redemptive power of the full sexual relationship—the very catastrophic outcome of the stage action seems to assert *per negationem* the belief in the redemptive power of sexual love. It is clearly more than a coincidence that Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, the first true masterpiece of the atonal music, set to tones the poem commissioned by Schoenberg from Marie Pappenheim, a minor poetess who belonged to Freud's inner circle and wrote the poem following Schoenberg's detailed instructions.

So where does Janáček's *Katja* belong? To the era limited, on the one side, by Romanticism with its notion of radical Evil ("pleasure in pain"), and, on the other side, by Freud, by the direct impact of psychoanalysis on arts. Why? Lacan located the starting points of the movement of ideas which finally gave birth to psychoanalysis in Kantian ethics (his critique of practical reason) and in the Romantic notion of "pleasure in pain." It is this epoch which provides the only proper ground for what is deceitfully called 'applied psychoanalysis.' Prior to it, we were in a universe where the Unconscious was not yet operative, where the subject was the Light of Reason opposed to the impersonal Night of drives, and not, in the very kernel of its being, this Night itself; afterwards, the impact of psychoanalysis transformed artistic literary practice itself (Eugene O'Neill's plays, for example, already pre-

suppose psychoanalysis, whereas Henry James and Katherine Mansfield do not). And this is also the horizon within which *Katja Kabanova* moves—this space of the heroic innocence of the Unconscious in which irresistible passions freely roam around. It is only in this space that one can use storm as a metaphor for the explosion of frustrated feminine sexuality. This is why *Katja Kabanova* is still an opera: the moment of the birth of psychoanalysis (the beginning of 20th century) is also the moment of opera's death—as if, after psychoanalysis, opera, at least in its traditional form, is no longer possible. No wonder, then, that Freudian resonances abound in most of the pretenders to the title of the 'last opera' (say, Berg's *Lulu*).

This insight allows us to account for the basic enigma of works like *Katja Kabanova* and *Jenufa*: are they really just the condemnation of oppressive mores which thwart feminine sexuality? Why resort to the idea of external oppression at the very moment in socio-historical reality when we fully enter industrial era? Is it not that, beneath condemnation, there is a nostalgic resort to a situation in which *real passions were still possible* and were only thwarted by the oppression? Schoenberg's *Erwartung* tells the bitter truth about the longing of Jenufa and Katarina: that it is thwarted *in itself*.

IV. STAGING FEMININE HYSTERIA

When Anton Webern proposed Arnold Schoenberg to write the music for a concert in Barcelona, Schoenberg replied: "I have made many friends here who have never heard my works but who play tennis with me. What will they think of me when they hear my horrible dissonances?"¹ All Schoenberg is here: the awareness of his radical breakthrough, but mixed with ironic kindness. There was no envy in him (Schoenberg was Gershwin friend and he enjoyed meeting US commercial composers). And he was right: his breakthrough was unbearably shattering, it was a key part of the modernist breakthrough, the only true artistic Event of the 20th century (whatever it is, postmodernism is not an Event).

In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel provided a wonderful characterization of Thucydides' book on the Peloponnesian war: "his immortal work is the absolute gain which humanity has derived from that contest."² One should read this judgment in all its naivety: in a way, from the standpoint of world history, the Peloponnesian war took place so that Thucydides could write a book on it. What if something similar holds for the relationship between the explosion of modernism and

¹ Quoted from Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, p. 45.

² Quoted from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of World History*, translated by John Sibree, New York: Dover Philosophical Classics 2004, p. 267.

the First World War, but in the opposite direction? The Great War was not the traumatic break that shattered late 19th century progressivism, but a reaction to the *true* threat to the established order: the explosion of vanguard art, science, and politics which undermined the established world view (artistic modernism in literature—from Kafka to Joyce—, in music—Schoenberg and Stravinsky—, in painting—Picasso, Malevich, Kandinsky—, psychoanalysis, relativity theory and quantum physics, the rise of Social Democracy...). This rupture—condensed in 1913, the *anus mirabilis* of the artistic vanguard—was so shattering in its opening of new spaces that, in a speculative historiography, one is even tempted to claim that the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 was, from the ‘spiritual’ standpoint, a reaction to this Event of rupture—or, to paraphrase Hegel, the horror of the World War I is the price humanity had to pay for waging the immortal artistic revolution in the years just prior to the war. In other words, one has to turn around the pseudo-deep insight on how Schoenberg *et al* prefigured horrors of 20th century war: what if the true Event happened in 1913? It is crucial to focus on this intermediate explosive moment between the complacency of late 19th century and the catastrophe of World War I—1914 was not the awakening from slumber, but the forceful and violent return of the patriotic sleep destined to block the true awakening. The fact that Fascists and other patriots hated the vanguard *entartete Kunst* is not a marginal detail but a key feature of Fascism.

Nothing encapsulates more forcefully the violent impact of the vanguard rupture than the (in)famous *Skandalkonzert* of March 31, 1913, a concert of the *Wiener Konzertverein* conducted by Schoenberg. Here is the program: Webern's *Six Pieces for Orchestra*, Zemlinsky's *Four Orchestral Songs on poems by Maeterlinck*, Schoenberg's *Chamber Symphony* No. 1, Berg's *Five orchestral Songs on Postcard Texts of Peter Altenberg*, and Mahler's "Now the sun wants to rise as brightly" (No. 1 from the *Kindertotenlieder*). However, Mahler's song was not performed since the concert ended prematurely: it was during Berg's songs that the fighting began, with the audience calling for both poet and composer to be committed to the asylum.

Schoenberg's *Chamber Symphony* performed at this event was composed 7 years earlier, in 1906, but the work which truly represents his musical revolution is *Erwartung* (Op. 17, composed in 1909). *Erwartung* is a double Event, maximal and minimal. First, it is a mega-event in the history of music: nothing remained the same after *Erwartung*, the coordinates of the entire musical landscape were transformed. However, one should not forget that *Erwartung* simultaneously renders a minimal Event, a barely perceptive subjective shift in the depicted "inner life" of the protagonist. This half hour one-act opera—or, rather, a monologue for solo soprano accompanied by a large orchestra—to a libretto by Marie Pappenheim premiered in 1924 in Prague, conducted by Alexander Zemlinsky. Marie Pappenheim studied medicine, but both her brother and her future husband were psychoanalysts; furthermore,

her second cousin, Bertha Pappenheim, was treated for hysteria by Joseph Breuer—she is the famous ‘Anna O.,’ the subject of the first case study presented in Breuer’s and Freud’s *Studies on Hysteria*.

Art and the Unconscious

Although there is a big tradition of the hysterical woman in late 19th century and early 20th century music, starting with Kundry from Wagner’s *Parsifal* and continuing in Strauss’ *Salome* and *Electra* as well as in the Chosen One in Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, in all these cases the theme of the hysterical madwoman is “camouflaged with the exotic trappings of antiquity (classical, biblical, primitive), [...] distancing it from its uncomfortable contemporary relevance. Schoenberg and Pappenheim gave it a raw, unvarnished treatment that laid its social and psychological message bare.”³ This brings us back to the tension between Pappenheim’s original libretto (a Freudian case rooted in social reality) and Schoenberg version of it (rendering a pure inner delirium with no social roots). The double trap to be avoided here is to privilege one of the two versions: either to claim that Schoenberg provides an aesthetic-irrationalist mystification of Pappenheim’s socially situated case of hysteria, or to dismiss Pappenheim’s libretto as a boring realist report which becomes a work of art only through Schoenberg’s purification.

³ Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, p. 327.

The link of *Erwartung* with feminine hysteria is a commonplace—but how exactly are we to define it? Behind this reference to hysteria, there are two different, although connected, phenomena. First, there is the artistic line from the mid-19th century (Wagner, Pre-Raphaelites, Strindberg). Second, there is Freudian psychoanalysis which began as the analysis of hysterical patients ('Dora,' Freud's first great case study, not to mention 'Anna O.'). Jacques Lacan rendered the division that characterizes the hysterical feminine subject in a concise formula: "I demand that you refuse my demand, since this is not that." When, for example, Wagner's Kundry seduces Parsifal, she actually wants him to resist her advances—does not this obstruction, this sabotage of her own intention, testify to a dimension in her which resists the domination of the Phallus? The male dread of woman, which so deeply branded the zeitgeist at the turn of the century (from Edvard Munch and August Strindberg up to Franz Kafka), thus reveals itself as the dread of feminine inconsistency: feminine hysteria, which confronted these men with an inconsistent multitude of masks (a hysterical woman immediately moves from desperate pleas to cruel, vulgar derision, etc.) and thereby traumatized them (and also marked the birthplace of psychoanalysis). What causes such uneasiness is the impossibility of discerning behind the masks a consistent subject manipulating them: behind the multiple layers of masks is nothing; or, at the most, nothing but the shapeless, mucous stuff of the life-substance. Suffice it

to mention Edvard Munch's encounter with hysteria, which left such a deep mark upon him:

In 1893 Munch was in love with the beautiful daughter of an Oslo wine merchant. She clung to him, but he was afraid of such a tie and anxious about his work, so he left her. One stormy night a sailing-boat came to fetch him: the report was that the young woman was on the point of death and wanted to speak to him for the last time. Munch was deeply moved and, without question, went to her home, where he found her lying on a bed between two lighted candles. But when he approached her bed, she rose and started to laugh: the whole scene was nothing but a hoax. Munch turned and began to leave; at that point, she threatened to shoot herself if he left her; and drawing a revolver, she pointed it at her breast. When Munch bent to wrench the weapon away, convinced that this too was only part of the game, the gun went off and wounded him in the hand.⁴

Here we encounter hysterical theatre at its purest: the subject is caught in a masquerade in which what appears to be deadly serious (dying) reveals itself as fraud, and what appears to be an empty gesture reveals itself as deadly serious (the threat of suicide). The panic that seizes the (male) subject confronting this theatre expresses a dread that behind the many masks,

⁴ Josef Paul Hodin, *Edvard Munch*, London: Thames & Hudson 1972, pp. 88–89.

which fall away from each other like the layers of an onion, there is nothing, no ultimate feminine Secret. *This* is what makes hysteria so unbearable: neither the primordially unconscious “irrationality” of the woman (on what Schoenberg’s music focuses) nor the feminine confusion as a reaction to the pressure exerted by the patriarchal order (on what Pappenheim’s libretto focuses). The narrative content of the *Erwartung* libretto is minimal. In the first three shorter scenes, nothing happens but the Woman’s incomprehensible rambling; only at the beginning of Scene 4 do elements of narrative content emerge—indications of her lover’s infidelity, an accident on her journey to a house, another woman will prevent her entering the house: “And they won’t let me in there... The unknown woman will drive me away... And with him so ill...” When she stumbles upon the corpse of her lover, she struggles with disbelief, shocked by her discovery; it later becomes clear that she was the killer:

No, that isn’t the shadow of the bench... Someone is there... He isn’t breathing... Moist... something is flowing here... It shines red... Oh, it’s my hands, they are torn and bleeding... No, it’s still wet, it’s from there... / *She tries with terrible exertion to drag the object forward.* / I can’t do it... It’s him...⁵

⁵ Arnold Schoenberg, *Erwartung. Monodram in einem Akt op. 17*, Libretto by Marie Pappenheim, Scene 4. Online at *The Schoenberg Center*: www.schoenberg.at.

Her inability to grasp the reality of her lover's murder predictably indicates her hysterical condition; it is only after she finds the strength to accept and integrate the knowledge of her lover's faithlessness that her thoughts become more focused and her emotions less malleable—she forgives and expresses compassion for his faithlessness, arriving at a full awareness of her self-deceit:

My dear... my only darling... did you kiss her often?... while I was dying with longing. Did you love her very much? Don't say yes... You smile painfully... Maybe you too have suffered... maybe your heart called out for her... Is it your fault?... Oh, I cursed you... but your compassion made me happy... I believed... I was happy...⁶

It is true that the Woman does not achieve the complete resolution of her psychic deadlock: at the opera's end, she again becomes dissociated, resuming her search as the opera concludes; however, there is a minimal event—a subjective reversal—just before the end, the acceptance of crime. One should see here the difference between Pappenheim's original libretto and the libretto effectively used by Schoenberg. Pappenheim's original libretto is basically a realist narrative which locates the hysterical woman in a clear social context: abandoned by her lover, she kills him, and the horror of this act makes her lose her contact with reality and

⁶ Ibid.

engage hallucinations; only gradually does she become aware of what she did and re-connect with reality. Through numerous deletions (of references to actual events and circumstances), Schoenberg transformed a coherent realist narrative of hysteria with a clear feminist tendency into an illogical nightmarish hallucination unconstrained by external reality. Two questions have to be raised here: why this link between the atonal music and psychoanalysis, and why does Schoenberg nonetheless attempt to transform a clinical case into a self-contained portrait of hysterical hallucination? The answer to the first question seems obvious:

Freud's findings held particular promise for Expressionist artists seeking to eradicate ornamentation, superficial obedience to established forms, and surface prettiness from their works. The revelation that there existed an unconscious mind, replete with images, feelings, and desires, obeying only its own labyrinthine logic [...] It is not surprising that Schoenberg found *Erwartung's* hysterical Woman an ideal subject for his leap into the world of the unconscious mind. The quest to access subliminal realms of thought and experience had augmented a widespread fascination with hysterics, for whom the barriers between conscious and unconscious mind had fractured.⁷

⁷ Claudia L. Friedlander, "Man sieht den Weg nicht... Musical, cultural and psychoanalytic signposts along the dark path of Schoenberg's *Erwartung* Op. 17," available online at <http://liberatedvoice.typepad.com/clf/erwartung.pdf> (accessed 22/1/2015).

The answer to the second question is that Schoenberg's transformation of the original libretto is grounded in his effort to liberate music from the task of imitating external reality: "Kandinsky viewed line and color as emotional effects and removed them from their descriptive function. Schoenberg does similar things with his music, which mirrors the extremely expressive content of the text." In other words, while we remain within the space of mimesis, what changes is the object imitated: in the same way that non-figurative painting tries to render directly the inner spiritual-affective reality, by-passing external reality, Schoenberg wanted his music to immediately manifest this same spiritual-affective reality. In contrast to the traditional art which functions as a *mimesis* of external reality, authentic modern art should by-pass the detour through external reality and function as a direct mimesis of inner life, a "representation of inner occurrences"⁸—and, here enters psychoanalysis: this inner life, not yet contaminated by external reality, is unconscious, that is, "art must express the instinctive and the inborn, the part of ourselves that is wholly unconscious and uncorrupted by convention."⁹

If, then, in a famous letter to Kandinsky, Schoenberg emphatically asserted that "art belongs to the *unconscious*,"¹⁰ this unconscious is the irrational and hallucinatory unconscious, the unconscious of the psychic "inner life," the confused and incoherent flow of

⁸ Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, p. 306.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

ideas, passions, affects—in short, the psychological unconscious of the absolute immanence of psychic life which is, as such, *de facto* indistinguishable from the stream of consciousness itself. But is this unconscious the Freudian unconscious? Did Lacan not demonstrate that the Freudian unconscious is not psychological, the unconscious of the irrational flow, of spontaneous inner life, but, on the contrary, quite literally meta-psychological: a symbolic structure? Lacan started his “return to Freud” with the linguistic reading of the entire psychoanalytic edifice, encapsulated by what is perhaps his single best-known formula: “the unconscious is structured as a language.” The predominant perception of the unconscious is that it is the domain of irrational drives, something opposed to the rational conscious self. For Lacan, this notion of the unconscious belongs to the Romantic *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life) and has nothing to do with Freud. The Freudian unconscious caused such a scandal not because of the claim that the rational self is subordinated to the much vaster domain of blind irrational instincts, but because it demonstrated how the unconscious itself obeys its own grammar and logic—the unconscious talks and thinks. The unconscious is not the reservoir of wild drives that has to be conquered by the ego, but the site where a traumatic truth speaks. Therein resides Lacan’s version of Freud’s motto “*wo es war, soll ich werden* (where it was, I shall become)”: not “the ego should conquer the id” *qua* site of unconscious drives, but “I should dare to approach the site of my truth.” What awaits me “there” is not a

deep Truth about my with which I must identify, but an unbearable truth that I must learn to live with:

The unconscious is neither the primordial nor the instinctual, and what it knows of the elemental is no more than the elements of the signifier. [...] The intolerable scandal when Freudian sexuality was not yet holy was that it was so 'intellectual.' It was in this respect that it showed itself to be the worthy stooge of all those terrorists whose plots were going to ruin society.¹¹

The unconscious Reason is, of course, not the coherent structure of the conscious thought-processes, but a complex network of particular links organized along the lines of condensation, displacement, etc., full of pragmatic and opportunistic compromises: something is rejected, but not quite, since it returns in a ciphered mode; it is rationally accepted, but neutralized in its full symbolic weight; etc. etc. We thus get a mad dance of distortions which follow no clear univocal logic, but form a patchwork of improvised connections. Recall the legendary case of the forgetting of the name Signorelli from Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*: Freud couldn't recall the name (Signorelli) of the painter of the Orvieto frescos and produced as substitutes the names of two other painters, Botticelli and Boltraffio, and his analysis brings to light the processes of signifying associations which linked Signorelli to

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, New York: Norton 2006, pp. 434–435.

Botticelli and Boltraffio (the Italian village Trafoi was where he received the message of the suicide of one of his patients, struggling with sexual problems; *Herr*, the German word for Mister—*Signor*—is linked to a trip to Herzegovina, where an old Muslim told Freud that after one can no longer engage in sex, there is no reason to go on living; etc. etc.). The complex rhizomatic texture of such associations and displacements has no well-defined triadic structure with a clear resolution; rather the result of the tension between “thesis” (the name Signorelli) and “anti-thesis” (its forgetting) is the compromise-formation of falsely remembering two other names in which (and this is their crucial feature) the dimension on account of which Freud was unable to remember Signorelli (the link between sex and death) returns in an even more conspicuous way. The Freudian unconscious is thus an inconsistent totality in which a moment condenses (*verdichten*) a multiplicity of associative causal chains, so that its explicit “obvious” meaning conceals the true repressed one. What would Hegel have made of Freud’s dream of Irma’s injection the interpretation of which unearths a kind of *superposition* of multiple interpretive lines (getting rid of the guilt for the failure of Irma’s treatment; the wish to be like the primordial father who possesses all the women; etc. etc.)? What would Hegel have said about a dream in which the day’s residue (*Tagesreste*) is connected to the core of the dream only through verbal or similarly tangential associations? What would he have said about a dream of a woman-patient (“*Her husband asks: Shouldn’t we have the piano tuned? She: It’s not*

worthwhile...”),¹² where the clue is provided by the presumed mental occurrence of the same fragment of speech in a previous analytic session during which she had suddenly caught hold of her jacket, one of the buttons having come undone, as though she were saying: “Please don’t look / at my breasts; / *it’s not worthwhile*.” There is no conceptual or thematic unity here between the two levels (the dream scene and the accident during the previous session), what connects them is just a signifying bridge.

How does the unconscious Schoenberg refers to relate to the “oceanic” aesthetic unconscious prevalent in the great tradition of the 19th century which begins with Schopenhauer, whose peak is Wagner’s *Tristan* and whose last great expression is Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, the unconscious of the oceanic feeling, of self-obliteration of subjectivity in the immense sea of the primordial formless abyss? Let’s proceed step by step.

The Impasses of Atonality

The Freudian unconscious brings us back to *Erwartung*, or more precisely, to the passage from atonality to dodecaphony. *Erwartung* was written in 1909, after the leap to pure atonality, but before Schoenberg had begun to work out his twelve-tone ideas in any systematic way. The commonplace is that the passage from ato-

¹² Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999, p. 142.

nality to dodecaphony marks the shift from extreme expressionism (music abandoning all pre-established fixed formal constraints in order to render as directly as possible the innermost unconscious subjective truth) to its opposite extreme, to “a haven for technical research and compositional tours de force. [...] twelve-tone composers went further than any others in ordering the content of their work according to rational structural principles, making content in effect tantamount to form.”¹³ Even Adorno agrees with this commonplace, reading the passage from atonality to dodecaphony as a dialectical reversal of expression of the inner into mere formal mechanical order. Here, however, Lacan’s notion of the Unconscious “structured like language” regains its pertinence: the passage from atonality to dodecaphony is thus not the passage from the depths of irrational unconscious to a new form of consciously planned rationality, but the passage *from the chaotic flux of consciousness to the real unconscious*. Tonality—atonality—dodecaphony thus form a good old Hegelian triad, but not only in the simplistic sense that atonality negates tonality and then dodecaphony negates the negation and introduces a new positive order; they do this in a much more precise and interesting way. Tonality is first negated in the terms of the old musical order, due to its mimetic inadequacy: the reproach is that it doesn’t faithfully render the inner psychic reality of man, and the shift to atonality is justified in the terms of extreme expressionism, as the only way

¹³ Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, p. 704.

to follow inner stream. Then only, the very mimetic principle is abandoned and the new radical de-psychologized formal order (dodecaphony) is imposed—or, in Lacan's terms, Schoenberg finally learned that the Unconscious resides outside, not in the depths of our souls.

What ordinary listeners perceive in atonal music is a lack of melody; however, the situation is more complex, since the 19th century predominance of melody is already a sign of the decline of harmonic relationships: "It is certainly true that melody was the principal basis of form in all nineteenth-century music after the death of Beethoven, but that was because harmonic relationships no longer possessed the force and influence they had throughout the eighteenth century."¹⁴ The composer whose work bears witness to this decline in an exemplary way is Tchaikovsky, the indisputable melodic talent who was well aware of his weakness in deploying the texture of a large musical form.

Tchaikovsky approaches true art not with his numerous "beautiful melodies," but when a melodic line is thwarted. We saw this in the second chapter in reference to the opera *Onegin*. There in the brief orchestral prelude, the short melodic motif ("Tatyana's theme") is not fully developed, but merely repeated in different modes, retaining the character of an isolated melodic fragment, not even a full melodic line. There is a genuinely melancholic character in such a repetition which

¹⁴ Charles Rosen, *Schoenberg*, London: Fontana/Collins 1975, p. 42.

registers and displays the underlying impotence, the failure of proper development.

Maybe Schoenberg was too dismissive of pseudo-tonal composers in whose predominantly tonal works one can discern echoes and traces of the atonal revolution—here are two surprising examples from none other than Shostakovich (maybe the third in the series of *Those Whose Name Should Not Be Pronounced In Public*). In his key symphonies (5, 8 and 10), the longest movement is always the first one whose inner logic follows something quite different than the sonata form: the movement begins with a strong Thesis, a Beethovenesque proud assertion of strength in pain, which then gradually morphs into a withdrawal towards another spiritual-etheric dimension—it is, paradoxically, this very withdrawal which generates an unbearable tension. Furthermore, there is an opposite movement in Shostakovich's work: David Hurwitz noted the “technique of brutalizing a former lyrical melody,”¹⁵ one of Shostakovich's procedures that he learned from Mahler. For example, in the development of the first movement of his *Fifth Symphony*, its principal theme, a lyric descending phrase on violins over a string accompaniment, is repeated as a grotesque, goose-stepping march, with cymbals, trumpets, snare drum, and timpani.

Schoenberg's passage from pure atonality to dodecaphony is thus necessitated by the immanent deadlock of atonality. *Erwartung* is praised by Charles

¹⁵ David Hurwitz, *Shostakovich: Symphonies and Concertos*, Milwaukee: Amadeus Press 2006, p. 25.

Rosen as “the quintessential Expressionist work”¹⁶—Schoenberg himself wrote: “In *Erwartung* the aim is to represent in slow motion everything that occurs during a single second of maximum spiritual excitement, stretching it out to half an hour.”¹⁷ However, such a radical approach soon reveals its immanent limitations. With the rise of atonality,

it seemed as if music now had to be written note by note; only chains of chromatic or whole-tone scales were possible, and these only sparingly. The renunciation of the symmetrical use of blocks of elements in working out musical proportions placed the weight on the smallest units, single intervals, short motifs. The expressive values of these tiny elements therefore took on an inordinate significance: they replaced syntax. [...] And since they took a preponderant role in composition it was obvious that a composer would choose elements with the most powerful, even the most violent values, as these small elements now had to do the work of much larger groups. The relation between the violence and morbidity of emotional expression and the formal changes of style is therefore not fortuitous.¹⁸

In a truly materialist formalism, one should thus turn around the relationship between form and content, fol-

¹⁶ Rosen, *Schoenberg*, p. 40.

¹⁷ Quoted from Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, New York: University of California Press 1975, p. 103.

¹⁸ Rosen, *Schoenberg*, pp. 29–30.

lowing Fredric Jameson's famous analysis of Hemingway in which he shows that Hemingway did not write short terse sentences in order to display the isolated stoic individuality of his heroes; instead form comes first, and Hemingway invented the isolated heroic individuality *so that* he could write in a certain way. And the same goes for Schoenberg: he did not make the fateful step to atonality to be able to express in music the extremes of morbid hysterical violence; he chose the topic of hysteria because it fitted atonal music.

Philip Friedheim has described *Erwartung* as Schoenberg's "only lengthy work in an athematic style,"¹⁹ where no musical material returns once stated over the course of 426 measures. As such, as a case of pure atonality, *Erwartung* is a *hapax*, like the square of Malevich, something that can really be done only once, the only specimen of its genre. *Erwartung* thus stands for "the extremity of the principle of non-repetition"²⁰ and, as such, it confronts us with the obvious problem of pure atonality, which, insoluble within its space, is predictably the problem of large musical forms. On what can the coherence of a large form be based when large-scale repetitions and similarities are prohibited? Schoenberg endeavored to resolve this problem with a series of strategies. His first, obvious, option was that, if an atonal work cannot achieve "a purely musical form drawn from the logic of a purely

¹⁹ Philip Friedheim, "Rhythmic Structure in Schoenberg's Atonal Compositions," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. XIX, no. 1 (Spring 1966), pp. 59–72, here: p. 59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

musical material,” then the principle of unity has to be sought in “extra-musical material, poetical texts, inner feelings, as if these feelings could in the final result be distinguished from their extraordinary musical incarnation.”²¹ The problem with this solution is that, when the “extra-musical material” is composed exclusively of inner feelings, these feelings, rendered in their chaotic immanence, become a dispersed inconsistent flow with no organic unity.

Schoenberg resolved a particular aspect of this problem—how to conclude a work when final harmonies are prohibited—with “the filling out of the chromatic space which brought about a saturation of the musical space, his substitute for the tonic chord—instead of absolute consonance, we get a state of chromatic plenitude in which every note in the range of the orchestra is played in a kind of glissando.”²² This solution points forward towards the twelve-tone technique (dodecaphony) in which all 12 notes of the chromatic scale are used as often as one another in a piece of music while preventing the emphasis of any one note through the use of tone rows; all 12 notes are thus given more or less equal importance, and the music avoids being in a key. (Schoenberg himself described the system as a “method of composing with twelve tones which are related only with one another”—echoing Saussure’s notion of differentiability: each tone is only its difference from the others, so there are only differ-

²¹ Rosen, *Schoenberg*, pp. 95–96.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

ences with no positive terms.²³ For this reason, Schoenberg didn't like the term 'atonality,' much preferring 'pantonicity': while the first term is merely negative, the second one points out how the tonal focus is shifting from one to another tone, so that every tone gets to enjoy its moment of hegemony.) The saturation of the chromatic space thus condenses into a final moment what dodecaphony deploys as—or expands into—a system. While atonality and dodecaphony are both 'egalitarian,' rejecting any Master-Tone, dodecaphony is an attempt to solve the problem of how to transform the atonal 'egalitarianism' into a new order. In other words, while atonality is the hysterical Event, dodecaphony is the result of the 'work of love' in the fidelity to the Event.²⁴

Richard Taruskin remarks with acerbic irony that Schoenberg's formula of the "emancipation of disso-

²³ The problem of serialism, of the equality of all variations and the hidden focus of the entire matrix, can be illustrated through a stupid incident that happened in Slovenia in a hippy commune at the end of 1960s, at the high time of the sexual revolution. A 'coordinator' of the commune (its *de facto* master, but masters were prohibited...) proposed that, in order to break out of the bourgeois individualism in the matters of sex, one should establish a complex matrix of variations of sexual partners, so that, in a well-determined period of time, every man in the group will have sex with every woman. However, the group soon discovered that the 'coordinator' imposed this complex matrix for one purpose only: he wanted to sleep with a particular girl, the partner of another member of the commune, and this matrix appeared to him as the only way to arrive at his goal without admitting his individual preference and desire for possession.

²⁴ Another procedure with a similar function is, of course, the use of *Klangfarbenmelodie* (color-of-the-sound-melody), a technique that involves splitting a musical line or melody between several instruments, rather than assigning it to just one instrument (or set of instruments), thereby adding color (timbre) and texture to the melodic line. (The term was coined by Schoenberg in his *Harmonielehre* from 1911.)

nances” “has excellent political ‘vibes’”:²⁵ it evokes freedom from an oppressive regime which tried to suppress its inner antagonisms—in other words, it is as if the admission of musical dissonances somehow mirrors the admission of social antagonisms. Taruskin is right to point out that the crucial result of the “emancipation of dissonances” was not the capacity of music to express catastrophic emotions—this capacity was merely the by-product (or collateral damage, as we use to say today) of “the achievement of a fully integrated musical space in which the ‘horizontal’ and the ‘vertical’ dimensions were at last equivalent”: as long as composing was constrained by rules of harmony, “‘horizontal’ ideas like melodies could not always be ‘vertically’ represented.”²⁶

There is, however, another option which Schoenberg doesn’t shirk from using: playing with the absent tonality itself. For example, he observed that when “a resolution of the two upper notes into consonances according to the rules of tonal harmony appears to be implied by the structure of the chord, [...] this allusion to older forms seems to have a satisfying effect even though the resolution does not actually occur.”²⁷ Did Mallarmé not practice something homologous with his virtual rhymes: the preceding lines imply that the verse in question will finish with a rhyme, but it doesn’t, making the missing word even more present in its absence (like “After my wife dropped dead, I went straight

²⁵ Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, p. 310.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

²⁷ Rosen, *Schoenberg*, p. 53.

to bed, and decided that till tomorrow, I will not give way to my joy [instead of the expected 'sorrow']").

Another procedure is directly borrowed from Romanticism: a number of *Erwartung's* motives first appear in sketchy fragments and only gradually rise to the surface of the musical texture. Here enters another strange bedfellow whose status is even lower than that of Tchaikovsky, the other One Whose Name Should Not Be Pronounced (among serious classical music lovers): Sibelius. The third movement of Sibelius' *Fourth Symphony* offers the exemplary case of his intense relationship towards musical matter/stuff: it is a kind of musical counterpart to the statues of Rodin (or even late Michelangelo) in which the shape of the body painfully, with strenuous effort, endeavors to emerge from the inert captivity of the stone, never quite getting rid of the oppressive weight of material inertia—the great effort of this movement is to give birth to the central motif, which occurs only a couple of times towards the end of the movement. The breakthrough of Romanticism resides precisely in rendering the melody proper “impossible,” in marking it with a bar of impossibility (the flowering of “beautiful Romantic melodies” is nothing but the kitschy obverse of this fundamental impossibility). So we have an apparently universal phenomenon (melody) which is, “as such,” nonetheless constrained, limited to a precisely defined historical period. What is perhaps the ultimate achievement of expressionist late Romanticism is precisely the notion of the melodic line, of the main motif, as something which has to be “wrought out,” sculptured,

extracted from the inertia of vocal stuff by means of painful labor: far from functioning as a starting point of a series of variations which then form the main part of the piece, the main musical motif results from the painful perlaboration of the musical matter which forms the main body of the piece. The basic feature of musical Romanticism is thus not the celebration of spiritual longing, but the gradual and painful emergence of a melody out of the struggle with the musical material. In this sense, musical Romanticism is deeply materialist: in Mozart and most of Beethoven, a melody is unproblematically here, simply given as the starting point of its variations, while in Romanticism, the melody only gradually emerges through the struggle with and work on the material. Perhaps, this intense relationship towards the inertia of the stuff/matter is what brings together Sibelius and Tarkovsky, for whom, also, earth, its inert, humid stuff, is not opposed to spirituality but its very medium.

In modernism proper, something even more radical happens: the material itself loses its substantial density and weight. In this respect, the third movement of Sibelius *Fourth Symphony* has to be contrasted to its concluding fourth movement. Each of them renders a specific mode of failure. As we have just seen, the third movement displays a painful effort to extract the main melody, the effort which, two times, comes to the verge of succeeding, yet ultimately fails: "what purports to be the main theme [...] as the movement evolves tries twice to achieve the status of a fully fashioned melody, but backs off each time, first when dissuaded by the

return of the opening motif, secondly when crushed by the brass.”²⁸ This failure, this inherent blockage which prevented the ultimate assertion of the melody, must have been especially difficult to bear for Sibelius who is otherwise known for his capacity to slowly build tension and then release it with the final emergence of the full melodic motif—suffice it to recall the triumphant finales of his *Second* and *Fifth Symphony*.—The fourth movement fails in a much more disturbing way;

the first part of the finale appears to be on the point of releasing melodic and impulsive generousities, as though the principle of laying longer, more pliable sentences alongside the concentrated thematic nuclei is about to be honored. But it does not come out like that: before long an unnerving process of disintegration begins which by the end has become total and irreconcilable. The last pages die away into a kind of resigned nothingness, with a thrice repeated figure from a solo oboe as of some mythical creature uttering a cry of infinite loneliness in the frozen wastes of the spirit...²⁹

The last part of this appreciation is not only pseudo-poetically awkward, but *sensu stricto* false: what effectively happens in the last part of the finale of Sibelius’ *Fourth Symphony* is something much more uncanny than the standard expressionist rendering of an utterly

²⁸ Burnett James, *The Music of Jean Sibelius*, Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 1983, p. 77.

²⁹ James, *The Music of Jean Sibelius*, p. 75.

isolated individual's scream heard by none in the void of an empty wasteland. We are rather witnessing a kind of musical cancer triggering the gradual progressive decomposition of the musical texture itself—as if the very foundation, the “stuff” of (musical) reality, begins to lose its consistency, as if, to use another poetic metaphor, the world we live in is gradually losing its colors, its depth, its definite shape, its most fundamental ontological consistency. What happens in the last movement of Sibelius' *Fourth Symphony* is thus something homologous to the scene towards the end of Josef Rusnak's *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), when Hall, the film's hero, drives to a place where he never would have considered going otherwise; at a given point during the trip, he stops the car seeing how the area, and everything within it, are replaced with wireframe models. He has approached the limit of our world, the domain where our dense reality dissolves into abstract digital coordinates, and he finally grasps the truth: that 1990s Los Angeles—his world—is a simulation... So, instead, like the third movement, getting engaged in the struggle to wrest out the melody, the fourth movement begins as if everything is *ok*, as if the ground is gained and promises the full organic deployment of its potentials; what happens then is that the material doesn't so much resist our effort to mold it (as in the third movement)—it rather directly disintegrates, slips out, loses its material substance, devolves into a void. We can do anything we want with it, the problem is that the stuff on which we work progressively implodes, collapses, fades out... This difference between third and fourth

movement is the difference between human and inhuman or, rather, post-human: while the third movement captures the human dimension at its most melancholic, the fourth movement changes the terrain into a dimension beyond in which a post-human mad playfulness coincides with subjective destitution.

The 'Dream-Thought' of *Erwartung*

This brings us to the uniqueness of Schoenberg's *Gurre-Lieder*, a cantata for five vocal soloists, narrator, chorus, and large orchestra, based on poems by Jens Peter Jacobsen. The title refers to Gurre Castle in Denmark, scene of the Danish national legend, the love of the king Waldemar for his mistress Tove, and her subsequent murder by Waldemar's jealous queen, Helvig. At the first performance in Vienna on February 23, 1913, Schoenberg was churlishly dismissive of its positive reception, saying "I was rather indifferent, if not even a little angry." Perhaps, however, his dismissal was misdirected.

The traumatic event in *Gurre-Lieder* (the murder of Tove ordered by Waldemar's evil wife) occurs *hors-champ* and is only reported by the elder Wood-Dove; furthermore, Part III is subdivided in three subparts in which an eccentric carnivalesque person acts like its focus—a naive frightened peasant, Klaus the Jester and the Speaker. (The position of court jester is already mentioned at the end of Part II, Waldemar's terrifying cursing of God, in which he plans to assume this role—

the fact that God allowed the murder of Tove proves that he is “a tyrant, not a king,” and as such he needs someone to rebuke him, a court jester telling him the truth—“Let me, Lord, wear your jester’s cap!”) Is this triad not like the notorious three doctors-friends from the second part of Freud’s dream on Irma’s injection? Does this not reflect the overall homology of *Gurre-Lieder* with the dream of Irma’s injection? In both cases, the descent into ultimate trauma changes into a strange, sublime and simultaneously ridiculous, properly unreal, beatific scene.

Gurre-Lieder is one of the strangest pieces in the entire history of music. Schoenberg’s preferences for chamber music are well known: in a nice slap at American vulgarity, he said that everything in music can be told with maximum five or six instruments—we only need orchestras so that Americans get it... How, then, to account for *Gurre-Lieder*, which demands soloists, a full orchestra and three choruses? In the notes to his recording, Simon Rattle proposed a wonderful formula: *Gurre-Lieder* is a chamber-music piece for orchestra and chorus—this, effectively, is how one should approach it. Every average composer can write a chamber piece for three or four performers—only a genius like Schoenberg can write a chamber piece for 600 performers.

Gurre-Lieder is a strange piece, marked by a double split: its melodic line was composed in 1901–1902, when Schoenberg was still a late Romanticist, and instrumentalized in 1910, after Schoenberg’s atonal break; this discord between the late Romanticist melodic line

and the atonal orchestration accounts for the piece's uncanny effect on the listener. But what makes *Gurre-Lieder* really unique is a mirroring between its musical line and the history of music itself: the shift from the late-Romantic Wagnerian heavy pathos to atonal *Sprechgesang* rendered in the very progress of the piece.

Gurre-Lieder starts with an unbearably beautiful dialogue between king Waldemar and Tove, his secret love. When the dove's song tells the king of Tove's death, Schoenberg out-Wagners Wagner himself by the intensity of the music. (If, as the saying goes, Wagner's *Rienzi* is Meyerbeer's best opera, the problem is only that he didn't write it, then Schoenberg's *Gurre-Lieder* is Wagner's best opera, with the same problem.) Totally shattered, Waldemar rises against God Himself, and is punished for this blasphemy by returning endlessly with his band of soldiers as undead specters; at this point, the shift begins from the late-Romantic heavily pathetic singing to the atonal *Sprechgesang* which announces the regeneration of Life, the transformation of the nightly spectral roaming of the 'un-lead' knights into the celebration of the new day-life, of the reawakened 'sane' nature—however, what kind of daylight is this? Definitely not the old, pre-Romantic laylight of the serene Classicist Reason. True, the Romantic passion, melancholy, and rising up against God, is replaced by renewed optimist beatitude—but, again, what kind of beatitude? Is this beatitude not uncannily close to the one caricatured in the archetypal scene from cartoons in which, after a cat or a dog is hit on the head by a heavy hammer, it starts to laugh blissfully

and to see birds twittering and dancing around its head?

There is certainly something terrifyingly obscene about the excessively pathetic declamation of the Speaker's *Sprechgesang* which concludes *Gurre-Lieder*: an utterly denaturalized nature, a kind of perverted, mocked innocence, not unlike the corrupted debauchee who, to add spice to his games, mimes a young innocent girl. The daybreak with which *Gurre-Lieder* concludes thus designates the moment when Romanticist infinite longing and pain break down in utter insensitivity, so that the subject is in a way de-subjectivized, reduced to a blessed idiot only able to utter meaningless babble. The entire "theatre of the absurd" is already there, in the finale of *Gurre-Lieder*.

Back to *Erwartung*, the key application of this procedure of gradually building up a motif from its sketchy fragments, as if these fragments are distorted signals coming from the future (the future of the fully formed motif), is a motif which emerges in fully realized form only in the concluding moments of *Erwartung*, at measure 410. The surprising fact is that this motif which serves "as a *Grundgestalt*, a fundamental musical idea or 'basic shape' that gave coherence to the harmonically nonfunctional ('atonal') musical texture"³⁰ of *Erwartung* comes from Schoenberg's earlier *tonal* song "Am Wegrand" (Opus 6), where it is part of its opening phrase.³¹ A commonplace psychoanalytic in-

³⁰ Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, p. 353.

³¹ The first one to draw attention to Schoenberg's recycling of the material from "Am Wegrand" was Herbert Buchanan in his "A Key to Schoenberg's *Erwartung*

terpretation would have been that it is as though, through free association, the earlier, repressed melody has returned to consciousness—here, psychoanalysis provides not the only topic (feminine hysteria), it affects the musical form itself...³²—However, the enigmatic fact is that it looks as though Schoenberg was pursued by the specter of tonality as he set about the creation of his first atonal works:

The internalized languages of the past, “something familiar and old established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression,” come back to haunt the new emerging language. This process is particularly vivid in music. The ghosts of the past become particularly haunting if we live with them on a day-to-day basis. Transposing Freud’s thoughts onto a musical sphere, I would say that tonality, the most *heimlich* of musical ground-

(Opus 17),” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 20, no. 3, Los Angeles: University of California Press, Autumn 1967, pp. 434–449.

³² Do we not find something similar in 24? Almost one third of each installment is spent on commercials which break up the show. The way commercials break the continuity of the narrative is in itself unique and contributes to the sense of urgency: a single installment, commercials included, lasts exactly one hour, so that commercial breaks are part of the one-hour temporal continuity of the series. Say, we see the on-screen digital clock signaling it is “7.46,” then there is a commercial break, then we return to the series with the same digital clock signaling that it is now “7.51”—the length of the break in our, spectators, real time is exactly equivalent to the temporal gap in the on-screen narrative, as if the commercial breaks miraculously fit into the real-time deployment of the events, that is, as if we take a break from the events which nonetheless *go on* while we are watching commercials, as if a live-transmission was temporarily interrupted. It is thus as if the continuity of the ongoing action is so pressing and urgent, spilling over into the real time of the spectator itself, that it cannot even be interrupted for the commercial breaks.

ings, becomes increasingly estranged and repressed as Schoenberg and others struggle to surmount it. The glimmerings of tonality that emerge here and there, in varying degrees and in varying intensities throughout Schoenberg's compositional life can well be understood as *unheimlich*. The sonorities of tonality have not fully disappeared, they have become estranged, evanescent specters.³³

It is difficult to miss the irony at work here: the repressed "dream-thought" is *tonal*—so which is the unconscious desire that operates in the song? The amorphous continuity of atonal music was often designated as a kind of stream of consciousness—but where is the Unconscious here? The atonal flow should function as a direct rendering of the Unconscious, freed from the constraints of the rational conscious speech or tonality—but this unconscious flow itself relates to a *tonal* fragment as its *own* unconscious... The atonal flow is rather like the flow of free associations—not primordial, but the conscious chaotic flow out of which interpretation should dig out the unconscious kernel—but, again, is the tonal motif the Unconscious moment here? Freud's analysis of dreams provides a precious key here.

The Freudian unconscious also has a formal aspect and is not merely a matter of content: recall the cases when Freud interprets a dream so that what is repressed/excluded from its content returns as a feature of the form of this dream (in a dream about pregnancy,

³³ Friedlander, "Man sieht den Weg nicht..."

e fact that the dreamer is not sure who is the father ticutates itself in the guise of the uncertainty about hat was the dream about); furthermore, Freud emphasizes that the true secret of the dream is not its content (the “dream-thoughts”), but the form itself:

The latent dream-thoughts are the material which the dream-work transforms into the manifest dream. [...] The only essential thing about dreams is the dream-work that has influenced the thought-material. We have no right to ignore it in our theory, even though we may disregard it in certain practical situations. Analytic observation shows further that the dream-work never restricts itself to translating these thoughts into the archaic or regressive mode of expression that is familiar to you. In addition, it regularly takes possession of something else, which is not part of the latent thoughts of the previous day, but which is the true motif force for the construction of the dream. This indispensable addition [*unentbehrliche Zutat*] is the equally unconscious wish for the fulfillment of which the content of the dream is given its new form. A dream may thus be any sort of thing in so far as you are only taking into account the thoughts it represents—a warning, an intention, a preparation, and so on; but it is always also the fulfillment of an unconscious wish and, if you are considering it as a product of the dream-work, it is only that. A dream is therefore never simply an intention, or a warning, but always an intention, etc., translated into the archaic mode of thought by the

help of an unconscious wish and transformed to fulfill that wish. The one characteristic, the wish-fulfillment, is the invariable one; the other may vary. It may for its part once more be a wish, in which case the dream will, with the help of an unconscious wish, represent as fulfilled a latent wish of the previous day.³⁴

Every detail is worth analyzing in this brilliant passage, from its implicit opening motto “what is good enough for practice—namely the search for the meaning of dreams—is not good enough for theory,” to its concluding redoubling of the wish. Its key insight is, of course, the “triangulation” of latent dream-thought, manifest dream-content and the unconscious wish, which limits the scope of—or, rather, directly undermines—the hermeneutic model of dream interpretation (the path from the manifest dream-content to its hidden meaning, the latent dream-thought), which runs backwards down the path of the formation of a dream (the transposition of the latent dream-thought into the manifest dream-content by the dream-work). The paradox is that this dream-work is not merely a process of masking the dream’s “true message”: the dream’s true core, its unconscious wish, inscribes itself only through and in this very process of masking, so that the moment we re-translate the dream-content back into the dream-thought expressed in it, we lose

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1973, pp. 261–262.

the “true motif force” of the dream—in short, it is the process of masking itself which inscribes into the dream its true secret. One should therefore turn around the standard notion of the deeper-and-deeper penetration to the core of the dream: it is not that we first penetrate from the manifest dream-content to the first-level secret, the latent dream-thought, and then, in a step further, even deeper, to the dream’s unconscious core, the unconscious wish. The “deeper” wish is located in the very gap between the latent dream-thought and manifest dream-content.

So, back to *Erwartung*: in a strictly homologous way, the *Wegrand*-motif is not the unconscious element, but the “dream-thought” of the piece. The actual Unconscious dwells elsewhere—where, exactly? In the music itself, in the form of music. The gap between form and content is here properly dialectical, in contrast to the transcendental gap whose point is that every content appears within an *a priori* formal frame, and hence we should always be aware of the invisible transcendental frame which “constitutes” the content we perceive—or, in structural terms, we should distinguish between the elements and the formal places these elements occupy. We only attain the level of proper dialectical analysis of a form when we conceive a certain formal procedure not as expressing a certain aspect of the (narrative) content, but as marking or signaling that part of the content which is excluded from the explicit narrative line, so that—and herein resides the proper theoretical point—if we want to reconstruct “all” of the narrative content, we must reach beyond the explicit narrative

content as such, and include those *formal* features which act as a stand-in for the “repressed” aspect of the *content*. To take the well-known elementary example from the analysis of melodramas: the emotional excess that cannot express itself directly in the narrative line finds its outlet in the ridiculously sentimental musical accompaniment or in other formal features.

There is, however, a key difference between melodrama and *Erwartung*: in the latter, the very gap between content and form is to be reflected back into the content itself, as an indication that this content is not all, that something was repressed/excluded from it—this exclusion which establishes the form itself is the “primordial repression” (*Ur-Verdrängung*), and no matter how much we bring out the repressed content, this primordial repression persists. In other words, what is repressed in a cheap melodrama (and what then returns in the music) is simply the sentimental excess of its content, while what is repressed in *Erwartung*, its Unconscious, is not some determinate content but the void of subjectivity itself that eludes the musical form and is as such constituted by it in the form of its remainder.

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In four compelling essays on classic opera, Slavoj Žižek examines how certain structural motifs repeatedly dominate the narratives by putting desire, as pure and captivating as possible, into music and on stage. Wagner's heroes, for instance, suffer from unbearable longing (*Parsifal*), an excessive yearning for the absolute (*The Flying Dutchman*), a deadly surplus of pure love (*Tristan and Isolde*). But why is desire's satisfaction fenced off through pain and failure? Why is the unification with the loved one indefinitely postponed? While the impossibility of the sexual relation and postponed fulfillment are crucial moments in Wagner's dramatic art, Žižek detects similar motifs, along with structures of libidinal antagonism, in the operas of Leoš Janáček, Peter Tchaikovsky, and Arnold Schoenberg.

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